
The Gift in the Gauntlet

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

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THE GIFT IN THE GAUNTLET

MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

THE GIFT IN THE GAUNTLET

By MRS. BAILLIE REYNOLDS

AUTHOR OF

"The Daughter Pays," "His Second Venture," "The
Judgment of Charis," "The Lost Discovery,"
"The Spell of Sarnia," etc.



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THE GIFT IN THE GAUNTLET

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THE GIFT IN THE GAUNTLET

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CHAPTER I

THE PAUPER PEERESS

THE smart little two-seater came gently to a standstill before the narrow, scarlet door of a narrow, ugly, red brick house in that part of Chelsea which thinks of itself as Belgravia.

The two young people who descended from it obviously belonged to the gilded youth of London. A moralist might have seen a commentary on modern life and manners in the fact that the girl had to alight first, as is necessary in most two-seaters. The man, however, followed her swiftly enough.

The evening sunshine of July slanted along the dull street between the high houses and gilded the edge of her slender form, which in its ethereal garments and pale silk footwear created the illusion of being poised for flight.

"Oh—don't get out—you needn't!" She stretched her hand to motion him back, but he was already at her side and they stood together, facing each other, conscious only of each other.

"Well," he remarked after a silent pause, "I sup-

pose it's good-bye for to-day, as I simply couldn't wangle an invitation for this dinner of Eleanor Lowrie's. However—you ride to-morrow morning?" He held out his hand, his hat raised.

Lady Courland, countess in her own right, surveyed him, her head slightly on one side, her remarkable eyes lingering upon his much too handsome face. Her age could not be more than two or three and twenty and her distant cousin, Guy Dinsmore, was perhaps five years older.

"For two pins I'd have given the dinner a miss and done a theatre with you," she said petulantly. "Goodness knows, I don't want to go; but Lady Glen made such a point of it; and she's a good sort, I can't let her down."

"She is that. So's Sir Tom. I like 'em both. Moreover, Miss Lowrie's dinners are not to be despised. One of the few unmarried women in London who keeps a chef and makes him toe the line. Well! Hyde Park Corner to-morrow at ten?"

As he spoke, a glittering limousine, with chauffeur and footman in blue livery shaded to match the colour of the car, drew in behind the pert two-seater.

"Why—there *is* Lady Glendavid! And she's dressed already! Don't tell me we've mistaken the time," murmured the girl nervously. She ran to the window of the car, crying: "Lady Glen! Lady Glen! I shan't be ready for an hour yet!"

The footman held open the door and a handsome woman of fifty, in grey, with pink roses and diamonds, carefully alighted. She looked like a duchess and was actually the wife of a profiteer knight.

On the pavement she kissed Lady Courland's fair and fragrant cheek. "No need for what my young friends call getting the wind up," said she graciously. "I have come early in order to see your uncle. I haven't had a talk with him for ages."

She greeted Guy politely, but with a touch of reserve, the meaning of which he could very well guess.

"I'm off," he said suddenly, "got to change and dine with a man——" He leapt into his car and was gone. The countess gave him a mutinous farewell glance as she went up the steps with her ladyship.

"Uncle Joe will be delighted to see you—did he know you were coming?" she asked.

"He did. I thought it better to make sure of his being in, as otherwise I must drive round and round the Park for hours while you are adjusting the fragment of gauze which in the interest of public morals you call a frock. Put on your choicest, Hermia; Eleanor Lowrie is a discriminating critic."

"Why have I never met her before?" asked Hermia, as a disagreeable-looking parlourmaid admitted them and they stepped into the narrow, dark hall.

"Because the tiresome woman has been abroad. She usually comes home in April, but this year she has been somewhere outlandish—the Isles of Greece or something—and couldn't tear herself away—now run off and be as quick as you can."

Hermia vanished up the steep stairs, which were all festooned with a kind of trellis work of wood, painted white, which, at the dawn of the century, was considered the last word in decoration.

The sour parlourmaid showed her ladyship up more slowly to the drawing-room.

The warmly tinted rays of sunset slanted through windows not very recently cleaned, upon the bare room with its sparse furniture, upholstered in black satin; and showed up the end-of-the-season staleness of a house hired furnished for three months.

A small wisp of an elderly man, over-dressed and ill-assured, rose from one of the black sarcophagus chairs, dropped a copy of the *Licensed Victuallers' Gazette* on the floor and came forward to greet Lady Glendavid with evident pleasure mingling in his agitation.

"Oh, Mr. Pippin," cried the visitor in tones of distress, "I'm afraid you have called me in too late—the mischief's done!"

Under this sudden attack, the little man gasped like a fish suddenly flung on dry land. "The mischief! The mischief?" he quavered. "Meaning——"

"Hermia and Guy Dinsmore! Of all the impossible things—the hopeless things! How *could* you have allowed it? That's the worst of you men! You never come to a woman to help you out of a hole until it's so deep that you must positively be *dug* out! What have you been about to let it come to this?"

"To this? Why, what's it come to?" Uncle Joe Pippin was as pale as ashes and looked so ill that her ladyship's kind heart reproached her.

"There, don't upset yourself," she added hurriedly, "but he brought her home just now—they had evidently been together all the afternoon——"

The peeress's uncle snorted. "All the afternoon, you say? Why, the 'ole day she's been with him! That is, I'm pretty sure she has, though she don't tell me no more than she can help." He wiped his bald and freckled head with a big and very clean handkerchief; and, as he evidently wished to speak, Lady Glendavid held her peace and waited.

"You see," he began, "it was unlucky me being ill. She and me was going to Courland Meynell, along with the lawyer who looks after the property; and before we went I 'ad to slip off daown to Marterstead just to give an eye to the business; and I was taken bad and couldn't travel, so the end of it was she and this Mr. Freeth went there withaout me. They faound him there—like his impidence I call it! But when she came back it was nothing but me dear cousin Guy, me only relation on me father's side! We liked each other from the first and we're so glad we met—all that kind o' stuff. You know."

"I can guess!"

"Then it turned out that he knew this Mrs. Belton—it was you introdooed Hermie to her."

"So you think I'm to blame? But at that time I didn't know that Nora Belton knew young Dinsmore. Now I hear on all hands that she means to marry him. I was rather horrified, in my old-fashioned way, when Nora, who was a most lovely girl, sold herself to old Ephraim Belton from Chicago. He only lived seven years and has left her unconditionally mistress of his fortune. From what I know and what I hear of Guy, I feel pretty cer-

tain that if it was in his power to make a rich marriage he would not hesitate. He may be and very likely is, head over ears in love with Hermia; but, if Nora Belton has made up her mind to marry him, marry him she will."

"I can well believe it," said Uncle Joe dismally.

"Well, melady," he went on, after a pause, "you know the position as well as what I do. Old Lord Courland, he never forgave his son. I can't hardly blame him. I didn't like the match myself and I warned Tilly. 'Them toffs, they'll make your life hell, my girl,' I said, but it wasn't any use. Killed her it did, in about three years. Meynell and she never got on together comfortable."

"But the old man took a cruel revenge on Hermia," said her ladyship indignantly. "Poor child! It wasn't her fault! And he has left her as nearly destitute as he could. Not that he had much to leave, but all that he had he willed to Guy Dinsmore and, if he could have worked it, that young man would have had the title and Courland Meynell, too!"

"All mortgaged it is, right up to the Park gates," remarked Mr. Pippin, with a hopeless air. "Hermie hasn't a penny except the rent her tenants pay her for the house itself; and now the Peglers, them Yankees who's had it for a twelvemonth, they go out at Michaelmas and it's all to do over again."

"Surely you see, then, that marriage between Guy and Hermia would be a financial disaster?"

He looked pitifully at her. "Well, melady, I've shot my bolt. I've spent all I've got, to give her this three months in town. I'm finished."

Looking sympathetically at him she had an inkling that this was literally true. There were pouches under his eyes, his skin was of a dreadful grey sallowness. He was a sick man, as well as a needy one. It was hard to believe that he could have had a sister beautiful enough to captivate Arthur Meynell. Yet Hermia, the exquisite, was the result of that regrettable union; and on her father's death she might have starved for all that her father's family cared. Her sole prop had been Uncle Joe, licensee of the Dominoes Inn at Marterstead.

It was five or six years back that the Glendavids, staying at Rapallo, became acquainted with the attractive father and daughter. Arthur Meynell had artistic ability and, as long as he lived, he managed to keep himself and Hermia by painting such sketches as wealthy tourists buy.

When the old earl's death left his only granddaughter willy-nilly heiress of the title and what was left of the estates, Lady Glendavid sought her out and the kind couple did what they could to help her.

That Guy Dinsmore should have cut in was a thousand pities. Knowing something of the young man by reputation, Lady Glen felt certain that he intended to marry money and buy Courland Meynell. Could his open attachment of himself to Hermia's side be just a way of keeping her unmarried?

She felt a violent determination to thwart him.

"Mr. Pippin! I came to tell you that the reason I am taking Hermia to Eleanor Lowrie's to-night is to introduce to her a man who could, if he would, give her back Courland Meynell and everything she ought to have."

He leaned forward, eyes bulging with interest.

"It's a curious, romantic story. You know Sir Tom has a shooting up at Lancemoor, in Mickle-shire? It isn't our own; we only rent it; the owner was a certain old Colonel Brice, of Romaldscar, an elderly, childless bachelor. Well, he died last winter and left all he had to a young man called Storm. The young man in question was an under-master at Balderston, the celebrated public school, in Mickle-shire. He had not a penny of his own and now he is what they call rolling. Tom tells me that the old Colonel had been living for twenty years on less than half his income. Young Storm is owner of Romaldscar, one of the finest places in Mickleshire, and a very rich man." She spoke earnestly, weightily, and he listened breathless.

"Hermia's never met him—has she? I never heard her speak of him."

"This is the romantic part of the story! He saw her somewhere or other about a month ago and, ever since, has been trying to procure an introduction. Miss Lowrie told me frankly that she is giving this dinner in order to help him along!"

"What's Miss Lowrie got to do with it?"

"I ought to have told you. Old Colonel Brice adopted two orphans, a boy and a girl, named Lowrie, the children of an old army friend of his. Miss Lowrie is a rich woman—her brother was killed in the war and she has his fortune as well as her own. I gather that Mr. Storm and she are on a footing of very old friendship."

"If it isn't too late," muttered Uncle Joe medi-

tatively. "What sort is he? A good-looker? Fancy man, same as this Dinsmore?"

Lady Glendavid hesitated. Here, apparently, was the weak link in her scheme. "You couldn't call him plain; in fact, he is almost handsome; tall, well set up. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"I can't honestly say that I think him the type likely to attract Hermia. He is . . . well, school-masterish. Unsophisticated. Even a bit parochial. Eleanor tells me he helps the vicar with bun-worries and so on. Sometimes plays the church organ."

"Oh, my!" sighed Uncle Joe, looking rather like a dog who sees its bone snatched away.

Lady Glen turned to him with decision. "Now tell me—what are you and Hermia doing when London empties? What are your autumn plans?"

He looked rueful. "Hermie's daft. Won't go anywhere without they asks me, too; and, of course, that's a bit too steep for most people."

She laid her delicate hand over his worn, freckled one. "Sir Tom and I hope you will both honour us with your company at Lancemoor. Come as soon as you can, stay as long as you please. The house is a bare two miles from Romalddscar and Guy Dinsmore won't be within a hundred miles, I trust! Mr. Storm ought to have a fine innings and, if Hermia has any sense at all, she will see which side her bread is buttered. Can you make her come?"

He sniggered a little, looking gratefully at her with his pale, prominent eyes. "She'll have to come, my lady, or go back to the Dominoes," he replied. "If

it's a choice between the old pub and a grouse moor, she didn't ought to make much trouble."

As he spoke, the door flew open and his niece walked in, arrayed for the evening. A maid followed, carrying a wrap which seemed to be composed of yards and yards of ribbon held together by lace.

Hermia walked up to Lady Glendavid, made a small, disdainful curtsy and asked lightly: "Will I do?"

CHAPTER II

ETHAN'S OATH

IN Eleanor Lowrie's drawing-room, in Brownlow Street, Park Lane, the only light came from one lamp in a corner of the back room, the wide window of which was so built out that there was a view of the Park from it. Daylight still lingered, so that blue shadows blended with gilded lights to illumine the still figure of the mistress of the house, lying back in a big chair, her long slim arms resting upon its sides.

The spacious, harmonious room seemed filled with the atmosphere of fresh air, flower scents and a certain peace which Ethan Storm had learned to associate with his thoughts of Eleanor.

He walked in without being announced, turned up no more lights, but went straight to the window and greeted her pleasantly and affectionately.

From beneath her half-closed lids she surveyed him, her almost black eyes heavy with feeling. Then she drew in her breath with a shiver and Ethan solicitously suggested that there were perhaps too many open windows; at which she laughed and said merely: "Duffer!"

They were exactly the same age, she and he, thirty-two; and, ever since she was seventeen, Eleanor

had loved the man who stood beside her so sublimely unconscious of the fact.

She was too dark—her features were too heavy—for beauty; but her elegance, combined with a taste in clothes which never erred, gave her an unusual kind of attraction and she had many admirers.

For years she had been assiduously telling herself that Ethan dare not speak on account of his poverty. Her wish being father to the thought, she had blinded her eyes thus, having also the comfortable certainty that, if he did not love her, neither did he love any other woman.

Then, unexpectedly, occurred the death of Colonel Brice who was by no means an old man. Ethan became the owner of lands and wealth. The reasons for his silence disappeared. Yet he did not speak.

Eleanor's confidence began to falter. She determined to try what absence would do and went abroad for months, during which he assured her that he missed her horribly. She returned—she summoned Ethan to town. No sooner had she done so than she called herself a fool. He was instantly overwhelmed with attentions and invitations; and it was now a month since he had come to her with a new note in his voice, a new fire in his hitherto quiet eye; and asked her to give him the chance of meeting Lady Courland.

As he stood now in the window, gazing out at the sunset over the dark trees of the Park, she studied him covertly. He was a tall man and his scholastic profession had kept him always in athletic trim. His back was flat, his shoulders good, he moved well.

But he had lived too long retired to be at ease in modern London. He was too frank, too simple, to hide his lack of social experience. He had no small talk, he did not understand the slang of the day. His own sincerity made it difficult for him to credit others with falsity: the kind of man, one must conclude, who would almost certainly be married for his money.

Why had she advised him to come to London?

Her love-quickenened perceptions found him changed that night. There was a new thing stirring in his blood. He was nervous, eager, alert for every sound; living for the moment when the girl who had caught his slow-moving imagination should arrive.

He replied to what Eleanor said absently. His mind was not fixed upon her. She was nothing to him, save a kind of adopted sister—as she ought to have known from the first!

After about five minutes' aimless talk she became aware that he had something to say—something which he found it difficult to bring out. Only the fact that almost at once the dinner guests would be arriving spurred him on.

"Eleanor, I do not suppose there is . . . I mean, of course, the Colonel never said anything to me about it, but he did not intend . . . what I am trying to say is this: Is there any reason why I should not marry?"

Eleanor felt her tongue dry in her mouth, but she managed to reply quite normally.

"Of course, there is no reason at all why you should not marry . . . so long as the terms Uncle Dan made are observed."

He turned his head quickly, his eyes seeking hers in the dusk. "You mean—I could not tell . . . *my wife?*"

There was a slight pause. "Surely you see that for yourself, Ethan. If you tell anyone, you are breaking faith."

"Anyone *else*; but a wife"—his voice was deep and very shy—"a wife *is* oneself."

"I'm afraid I can't agree there," said Eleanor tremulously but firmly. "In these days the oneness of husband and wife is simply a thing of the past. You cannot tell your secret to any human soul without breaking your oath."

He pondered this long. "You could absolve me, if you would," he said at last, with a wistful smile.

"I don't think you would be ungenerous enough to ask me to run that risk," retorted she, quickly and coldly; and as she spoke the butler pushed open the doors, switched on lights and announced "General and Mrs. Ponsford."

Only the long habit of the practised London hostess enabled Miss Lowrie to converse with the guests who followed at short intervals. She had before her eyes the mental picture of Ethan's start of surprise, his hurt aspect, his air of being brought up sharp against an unsuspected obstacle. Moreover, she was on tenterhooks of suspense, longing yet dreading to see in the flesh the girl of whom she had heard so much.

For the past few months, ever since the death of the late Lord Courland, the papers had been full of the story. It was the stereotyped "romance"—the

penniless daughter of a peer and a publican's sister—the girl in whose veins flowed the blood of Vere-de-Vere and the blood of the Pippins! It was everything that Eleanor most hated and she felt certain that the heroine of the story would be everything that she most hated also.

Lady Glendavid and her protégée were the last of the twenty-two guests to arrive, as they had been obliged to cross Hyde Park, in order to collect Sir Thomas from Connaught Square. When their names were announced, Eleanor, to her own rage, found herself trembling with excitement.

Lady Glen swept in impressively, and duly presented the girl who followed her.

Hermia stood in a circle of eyes which, although polite, were keenly inquisitive. Uncle Joe Pippin, even though backed by Lady Glen, had not been able to place his niece "where she belonged" socially. She was a stranger to most people present. Somehow she conveyed the idea of a very pale pink tulip in its sheath of subdued silvery green. There was something almost unreal in the untouched fairness of her beauty. The arrangement of the blonde hair above the forehead and framing the sides of the face recalled the Umbrian type of loveliness immortalised by Raphael. As Nora Belton once said of her, she made every other woman in the company look sketchy.

The eyes were the only indication of a temperament not wholly dove-like. They were darkly lashed, particularly as to the lower lid; and there was a green tint in their blueness. Their expression was

both mischievous and critical and, the moment she met their glance, Eleanor said to herself: "Ethan has no chance! Thank God, he has no chance here!"

Aloud she said: "Lady Courland, let me introduce my very old friend, Mr. Storm."

Exhorted by Lady Glen, Uncle Joe had been wise enough not to mention Mr. Storm to his niece. She glanced up—a good long way up—into curious dark-grey eyes, set deep in shadow. This man, whoever he was, did not look bad, although he wore a moustache—that legacy of the war which tends to make a man appear slightly out-of-date.

Lady Glen was greeting him almost affectionately.

"How nice to see you again! When we parted at Lancemoor, last autumn, how little I thought that you would be our landlord this year! It all seems to have happened very suddenly. You'll allow me to congratulate you upon your accession of fortune."

"I'm not a bit used to it yet," he admitted, and, even though they were old acquaintances, his diffidence of manner was noticeable. "I'm trying—not very successfully at present—to forget that I have it all at the cost of the loss of my best friend."

Hermia's lip curled. Eleanor, watching, could see the scorn in her eyes. This man was of a very tedious type. He had uttered the copy-book sentiment. The girl had not the wit to see, as Lady Glen saw, that he meant what he said.

Eleanor had need of all her self-mastery to enable her to turn from those two and superintend the pairing off of couples for the dining-room.

Ethan was, in the opinion of most strangers, a dull man. But he was rich. If rumour spoke truth, Lady

Courland had not the proverbial bean. She was quite capable of marrying him and making him miserable. . . .

Miss Lowrie become aware that her dinner partner was talking as they walked downstairs. . . .

"Is that so? You are really going up to Romaldscar as his guest? Won't that be odd for you, who for so many years was mistress there? And have you considered Mrs. Grundy at all? Don't please forget that you are still young and attractive!"

She laughed. "Oh, that's all right. The Verners will be there. Do you remember his sister, Molly? Such a feather-pate! Such a contrast to her brother!"

"Of course I remember her! Married in her teens—one of the Balderston masters, didn't she?"

"Yes, Billie Verner; and, as they live in Martershire, Ethan and she haven't seen much of each other since the marriage."

"Well, I hope you are going to get me invited?"

"To Romaldscar? Oh, would you come? With all my heart!"

"I wish I could think you meant that! All your heart! I should be a rich man, Miss Lowrie!"

She smiled—a smile which she hoped might look appreciative; but they had reached their places at the head of the sparkling table and her eyes were on the pair at the farther end.

In her heart there surged up a mad gust of exultation. After all, she had a hold over Ethan. It might be that she would be arbitress of his fate; for she would make him keep his oath. If he married that girl, she would never release him—never!

CHAPTER III

TABLE TALK

MISS LOWRIE had arranged her party with that care and knowledge which made her so good a hostess. But for herself, Ethan Storm and Hermia, the only other unmarried guest was Lord Flaunden, the middle-aged widower who had taken her down to dinner.

Ethan sat at the foot of the table with Lady Courland on his right hand. From her own place, Eleanor had a view of her assured, disdainful little face and could realise something of her impatient disgust at being hemmed in between him and stout, old Admiral Best. Purposely, Eleanor had given her an uninteresting right-hand neighbour; for she did nothing by halves. Ethan had begged for a chance and he should have it, but she could not help hoping that he was in for such a snubbing as should disillusion him.

In her petulance, Hermia would give the shy man no help. It was only a sense of desperation that goaded him to the triviality of inquiring what she had been doing with herself that hot afternoon.

"Been at Hurlingham," she answered listlessly, "but there was no polo worth looking at. No nothing. Too late. Nearly everybody gone. Do you belong?"

"No. It doesn't seem worth while—I live such a long way off and don't expect to be very much in London. I have just inherited a property which carries with it the condition that I live on my estate at least six months of every year."

"Help!" said Hermia vulgarly. "I wonder you accepted it on such terms."

He laughed. "But it's no hardship to me. I like managing an estate. It's the life I would have chosen."

She looked at him rather as one might contemplate a Hottentot seen for the first time at close quarters.

"Where is your place?" she asked.

"In Mickleshire. Close to the Moors. In fact, a big slice of the estate is nothing but moor; but there is also some very fertile land——"

She broke in. "Why, I believe—isn't Sir Tom's shooting thereabouts?"

"Sir Thomas Glendavid? He actually rents Lance-moor, part of my estate."

"Then perhaps it is fortunate that I met you, for you can tell me all about it! Lady Glen, who brought me here to-night, wants me to go and stay up there with them next month—in fact, quite soon——"

She was not looking at him, nor even thinking of him, or she would have seen the eyes, which had looked so sombre beneath their solid eaves of brow, light up with a glow of pleasure.

"That's simply splendid!" said he. "But perhaps you ought not to take the opinion of so partial a judge as myself about Romalddscar. I love every

acre, every copse, every tuft of heather in the county. Have you never been there?"

"I've only been in England a year or two—since my father died. He and I lived in Italy, France, Switzerland, Sicily, Corsica—the Belearic Isles—wherever our fancy led us. He was a painter."

"And you liked that life?"

"M'yes; pretty well. Better than England, anyway."

"You don't like England?"

"So far, I loathe England; but, more than anything, I loathe the English."

He was frankly surprised. "I always thought we were a fairly decent lot," he confessed, with a slight laugh.

"Ah, you wait until you are in my position and try! You see if you could bear what I've had to take lying down."

She spoke with set mouth and her eyes seemed to shoot green fire. "Why, I'm related—blood-kin—to half the out-and-outers in England; and they all said: 'Dear girl, how nice to discover you! We must see a great deal of each other! Unfortunately we've given away all our tickets for Goodwood—we've already made up our party for Henley; and we've asked the Duchess for so many tickets for the fancy ball that we haven't the face to beg for another—but do come and dine with us when we are almost by ourselves—just a cosy family chat!' And when I arrive: 'Ever so sorry, but Bill and Ian and Peter and Patrick and all the rest of them had to go out. I forgot it was the Blank-Blank's dance this evening!

But I've asked Cousin John and Cousin Fanny; I knew they'd love to meet you!' Cousin John and Cousin Fanny are so old they have to be dragged up and downstairs by the butler. All the men of my own age are carefully shepherded away in case they should commit the indiscretion of marrying a girl with no money! . . . And then there are the other lot. 'Oh, dear Lady Courland'—these are the profiteer peeresses—'I am so anxious you should meet my Antony! He is really quite remarkably out of the common run—a most exceptional fellow—and he's been desperately in love with you ever since he saw your portrait in the *Daily Chat*. No mercenary marriage for my Antony, thank you!' " She grinned at him, a naughty little grin, like a baby's appreciation of its own joke. "Oh," said she, "I never want to speak again to any of the folks I've met this season."

He was regarding her intently. "I have often wondered how you liked all the newspaper publicity."

She laughed contemptuously. "Oh, I don't so much mind that. The people who read the newspapers are not the people you want to make friends with."

"That's quite true."

"I think it's rather sweet of them to take an interest in me. They'd be still more thrilled if they knew more—knew how rotten it is not to belong anywhere. I know exactly how those poor half-castes feel, who are neither black nor white. Did you know my mother was the daughter and sister of a publican?"

"I have, of course, seen allusions to your romantic

birth in the papers. It makes you twice as interesting to the great heart of England."

"Oh, England!" contemptuously. "England has no heart. Only an insatiable curiosity."

"I'm sorry you think so badly of us; but I will admit that you are not without justification," he began, but she interrupted, with a desperate haste, feeling that if he began to prose she might yawn in his face.

"Never mind about that! Tell me of Romaldscar. What kind of country is it? Very out of the way?"

"You mean remote? Yes, I fear it is that. Do you not like wild, solitary country?"

"Depends on what you call solitary. A dozen nice places scattered round, with a dozen nice house-parties, would content me. Lady Glen's shooting-box is quite small; if my uncle and I are there, she won't have room for many others——"

"I shall be within easy distance of you and I shall be having a house-party. Not a very big one, as it is my trial trip. One of my guests you know—it was at her house that I first saw you at a ball last month; Mrs. Belton."

There was no disguising Hermia's interest now. "Mrs. Belton? Is she going to be at Romaldscar?"

"She has promised to come and to bring a couple of guns."

The Raphael face of the Countess was suffused with radiance ineffable. Nora Belton was coming to the northern moors and had been asked to bring men. She was practically certain to bring Guy Dinsmore. The whole scheme suddenly shone out as the most delightful on earth.

"If only the weather is decent, I believe we shall have a grand time of it," she said graciously.

He had no words in which to tell her what his own feelings would be. His heart was pounding, his head swimming, he was elated beyond measure by the glory of her smile; but he said, quite composedly: "I wonder if by chance you like such things as gorges—waterfalls—castles?"

"Castles?" She caught at the word.

"My place, Romaldscar, is a genuine mediæval fortress. Of course, it has been tinkered with and added to and parts of it rebuilt; but the Keep is almost untouched and we have a bloodstain on the stair."

Her eyes dilated. She seemed genuinely interested. "You lucky man! Of course, if you have a bloodstain you must also have a ghost! It is haunted—*isn't it?*"

"Only part of it," he replied apologetically, "and that not the part where we accommodate our guests."

"You speak as if you believed in it?"

There was a pause before he answered: "Perhaps I do. But I have to confess that I don't like to talk about it."

"Well—you began it!"

"I did indeed—with the selfish idea of exciting your interest. However, there's one place on my property which is really very weird—the waterfall they call Great Boon Ghyll."

"What is a ghyll?"

"A narrow cleft between rocks, through which a stream flows. Great Boon Ghyll is in a place very difficult of access and tourists are not allowed there.

It is more jealously guarded than any bit of the estate."

"What makes it so curious?"

"That boons are granted there. Or so they say. It's rather a terrifying spot—two black cliffs, with a small but violent rush of water which has worn for itself a channel between the sides of the gorge not more than a foot wide. In one place the fall is quite perpendicular and, about half-way up, there juts out a bit of rock like a big step and the water falls through a round hole in that step. The surrounding ledge is accessible, and my folks say that any boon is granted there if asked for in the correct manner."

She demanded quite breathlessly: "And what is the correct manner?"

"It's rather daunting, for the gorge is so deep and narrow that it's almost pitch dark! You must stand upon the step, hold both your hands in the water and *utter your wish aloud*. There's a very perfect echo, and they say, if echo doesn't repeat the wish, the **boon won't be granted**."

Her attention was caught, and she looked at him earnestly, her turquoise eyes gleaming.

"Do you believe it?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Never tried; but the natives swear it is so. As for me, I have never ventured to test it; for you must utter only the earnest, sincere wish of your heart. To wish for trifling things, such as a fine day, or a new hat, would bring trouble on you."

"If you really wanted something tremendously, would you try?"

"Who knows?" he murmured, feeling as if his very soul were drowning in the questioning of those wonderful eyes.

"Is it essential to believe that the boon will be granted?" was her next demand.

"I never heard so; but the person you ought to consult is old Marnie Pickersgill, who lives with her son in a cottage close by. Her duty is to keep off trespassers, and she knows all kinds of weird tales about the powers of the water."

"Will you take me to see her?"

"Rather! If you can face the rough walking——"

"I face rough walking!" she cried. "Why, dad and I lived in an old, half-ruined castle in the Apennines for nearly two years!"

The allusion to Italy started them talking about travel. He had hardly travelled at all himself. Narrow means and a mother to look after had clipped his wings, as he owned with much simplicity.

Hermia talked down to him with an amused condescension. Never had she met anyone so provincial, so inexperienced for his age as this tall, diffident man. But he was so absorbed in every word she said that, there being nobody else to divert her mind, she certainly presented, to the onlookers, the appearance of getting on well with her companion.

Lady Glendavid was so much encouraged that she grew quite absent-minded, building air-castles; and Eleanor watched covertly, her black eyes smouldering. She foresaw nothing but headlong disappointment for the man whom she would have shielded from every grief.

CHAPTER IV

ROMALDSCAR

SUNDAY afternoon and the August sunshine broad and comforting upon the terrace which ran along the south frontage of Romaldscar Castle.

Sunk in big chairs, smoking lazily, were Lord Flaunden and Sir Tom Glendavid, the latter having walked over from Lancemoor to pay his respects to his landlord. It was early in the month—the grouse still clicked and called to each other in the heather, undisturbed by marauders lurking in the earthy butts. The master of the house was absent, having walked over to the tiny collection of cottages known as Lancekirk, to play the harmonium at an afternoon service. His brother-in-law, Bill Verner, had most unwillingly accompanied him. Mrs. Verner and Miss Lowrie were invisible upstairs, awaiting the moment when Lady Glen and her guests would drive over to tea and to take back Sir Tom.

Flaunden's critical eye was studying the severe grey façade of the castle, which on that side was Tudor, having been entirely rebuilt in the final decade of the sixteenth century. From the dignified walls his gaze travelled down to the gorge below them, wherein with distant roar flowed the waters of Lancet Beck. By turning his eye westward he could descry the

purple summit of Mickle Fell and the long rampart of Cronkley, and presently he heaved the sigh of one completely satisfied with beauty.

"I had no idea this was such a fine place," was his comment.

"One of the finest in England, in my estimation," replied Sir Tom, "partly because it is one of the least spoiled."

"Quite. I think we may remark with truth that Storm is a lucky man. Strictly between ourselves, are you not a little surprised that Miss Lowrie should have allowed her adopted father to make such a will?"

Sir Tom shrugged. "She does not like the northern climate. I think the bequest of the estate would have been an embarrassment to her. She prefers to be free to go where she will. To have to spend at least half each year here would have irked her."

"Need she have done that?"

"The Colonel made it a condition in his will that Storm must do so."

"Did he, though? I wonder why."

"Couldn't bear the thought of the place being neglected, I suppose. He was quite a recluse himself."

The words sounded convincing, but something in the speaker's tone made Flaunden look at him steadily.

"Seriously now, what did you think when you heard of this young man's windfall? Were you surprised?"

After a slight hesitation: "Perhaps I was," owned Sir Tom. "Old men with no natural heir usually leave their money to public funds of some kind, don't they?"

"Did he mean a match between Storm and Miss Lowrie?"

"Possibly."

"Did Storm himself know beforehand of his intention?"

"Oh, yes. He knew. I don't suppose he expected to inherit for a long time. Brice was only just over sixty when he died."

Flaunden thought for some moments, then said: "Well, I can't get it out of my head that there must have been some kind of a *quid pro quo*."

"You've thought that, too, have you?"

"Which means that you have had the same idea. Ever see the will?"

Sir Tom smiled, colouring slightly. "They say men are not inquisitive. I own up to it! I went to Somerset House and had a look. The only condition imposed is the one about his having to live at least six months of every year in the castle; oh, yes—and that he is not to turn out one Rogers, an elderly valet who, with his wife, lives in the upper part of the keep. They are to continue to live there, rent free, until their death. They are pensioned pretty liberally; but, as Storm is not likely to wish to live in that part of the castle himself, the condition cannot be called an onerous one; at least, the estate seems cheap at the price."

"Quite. If there be any further agreement, it is a secret one—and, legally speaking, Storm is not bound by it."

"That," suggested Sir Tom, "might be a reason why he was the chosen heir. If ever a man was completely trustworthy, I should think Storm was that man."

"I agree. Dull, but excellent. The sort of chap

you would want by your side at a pinch and pay heavily to get rid of afterwards."

"I don't think I agree with you that Storm's dull. All he wants is a thorough shaking-up. His father was a g.p. and made a bare living. On his death the widow was almost entirely dependent on her son. Balderston isn't a gay spot and Mollie Storm married early and left her brother to bear the whole brunt of it. Add to all this that his profession has been schoolmastering and you'll see that it is natural that his style should be a bit cramped."

"True. I grant what you say and I think our friend is in the way to get a pretty thorough shaking-up, if he is seriously attracted by that quite indefensibly attractive little rogue, the Countess. She'll larn him proper."

Sir Tom rumbled inwardly—which was his way of laughing. "Good for him, perhaps. But he'll take it terribly hard, I fear."

"What do you fear? That she refuses him, or accepts him? In either case he will be miserable. The gods, envious of his astonishing stroke of financial luck, have loaded the matrimonial dice against him pretty heavily, poor beggar!"

"Pity he didn't marry Miss Lowrie," remarked Sir Tom.

"Oh, come! Throw away a woman like that—a woman born to be a leader of society—upon a male old maid and provincial at that? No, no! Eleanor's destiny is not among these fells. Fascinating creature! But she's never been the same since her brother's death." Flaunden smoked on a minute in

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silence. "Horrible thing, that," he said after a pause.

Sir Tom looked up, mildly surprised. "Anything unusual about it? I thought he was killed in action?"

"So he was; but . . . have I your word not to pass it on if I tell you?"

"You have."

"Not even to Lady Glendavid?"

"Particularly not to her," said Sir Tom, with a grin.

"Well, then—Garron Lowrie was shot in the back—it may have been by his own C.O.—as he was fleeing from the enemy."

"Great heavens! Does his sister know that?"

"Most certainly not. They wrote to her—the kind of stuff they usually sent home, to soften the blow—such a promising young officer—so popular in the mess! (That was true enough.) But I was there and knew the circumstances. He lost his nerve completely, the very first time he was under fire—and he and his company ran like hares. It was one of those awful massacres in the early days, when so many of our troops were raw and untried. We had to fall back and it was nearly four days later that his body was found."

"Dear, dear," murmured Sir Tom. "Does Storm know it, d'you think?"

"I couldn't say, but I think he must. I suppose the knowledge would have killed the Colonel. Garron was his godson and namesake and was to have been his heir. But Storm's regiment was not far off and, of course, out there, everyone was talking of it for a week or so."

"Storm did well in the war, didn't he?"

"Oh, very. Got the M.C. He's as steady as poor Garry was mercurial."

As he spoke, the man who occupied their thoughts hove in sight, walking with his long, light stride, carrying an attaché case and a big music-book, and followed by his stouter and shorter brother-in-law, who was looking considerably the worse for wear.

"Hallo!" said Storm. "Where's Mollie? Here's Bill, perishing for a drink! Sit down, Bill, I'll get hold of Hart and tell him to look after you——"

"Well," asked Flaunden lightly, as he was making for the drawing-room window, "have you owned yourself a miserable sinner for the second time to-day?"

Storm smiled. "Oh, no, the service was very short—we've been drilling most of the time. A scout parade, you know. I'm the master and we're expecting to get reviewed by royalty shortly at Balderston. Bill ought to be used to it—he's a scoutmaster at his own shop——"

Bill growled ferociously as he dropped into a deck chair, mopping his disordered complexion. "Hang it all, Ethan, I'm a schoolmaster I own, but not a nigger-driver! You'd break the spirit of an iron horse!"

Storm only laughed at him as he turned to his butler, just appearing with the tea-table—and gave him his orders.

Hart, like most of the staff at Romaldscar, had been there in the Colonel's day, so that he and his new master were old friends, and Ethan, fortunately, was able to communicate his wishes without the shyness

which would have paralysed him had they been strangers.

His heart was beating like a boy's as he took the broad, shallow stairs three at a time, streaking along the gallery to his own room. She was coming—she would be there shortly—he would see her in these surroundings wherein he had been picturing her for the past fortnight; and, even as he brushed the last speck of dust from his coat, he heard the hoot of Lady Glen's car passing the lodge.

By the time he had run downstairs the visitors were just emerging from the window upon the terrace, and he met Mr. Pippin for the first time; not without a shock.

Mollie Verner was most unlike her brother—small, vivacious, entirely modern. It took her just one minute after Lady Courland's arrival to decide that Ethan meant business. She was delighted. Her brother's marriage to a peeress in her own right would put the final touch to the family glories. She arranged her guests dexterously round the tea-table, so that Ethan and Hermia should be side by side.

The other two members of the party now strolled up, having been for a walk in the woods. These were a girl called Heather Morley, a great friend of Mollie's, who had invited her before hearing of Lady Courland, in hopes that Ethan might take a fancy to her; and Frank Benson, a pleasant young fellow who had been in Storm's firm at Balderston and was now trying to make a living as an architect. Storm was already hard at work upon model cottages in Lancekirk and Benson was designing them.

He came from Manchester and was not troubled with shyness; so, before long, Mollie, he, Heather Morley and the Countess were talking with mutual understanding. Ethan sat by, handicapped in every direction; by his natural shyness, his rusticity and the depth of his feeling for this particular girl. It was not a question of his preferring her to others. There simply were no others. He sat helpless while the talk flashed from tennis to the last new dramatist, thence to balls, carnivals, and various experiences on the Riviera and in Italy. He had never been to Italy, his purse and his invalid mother having limited his continental excursions to Dieppe and Ostend—a week in Holland—a walking tour in Belgium. Nobody was in the least interested in walking tours or in Belgium. They were discussing a battle of flowers—and a society scandal in Monaco which had lately filled the newspapers. Ethan felt excluded and forlorn, but knew not how to assert himself.

Poor Uncle Joe had been much in the same case, as the Glendavids were chatting with Flaunden, but Eleanor had come nobly to his rescue. She knew, from Lady Glendavid, how the little man had stood by his niece when she was repudiated by her grandfather, and the story appealed to her.

She soon had Mr. Pippin talking and, when he had drunk his tea, she suggested going round the grounds with her, an invitation which filled him with nervous delight.

“Can’t go very fast—bit short of breath,” he murmured apologetically, and she promised not to take him downhill. Although the greater part of the gar-

den was laid out in a tumbling ravine which opened its heart to the south and was sheltered from the blustering of the western winds, they could visit the hothouses without changing their level. Billy Verner had gone into the house in a disgusted search for something stronger than tea, and Ethan was just dismally thinking that he might as well not be there at all, when Lady Courland turned swiftly round to him and her incisive little voice demanded:

"Talking of luck—Mr. Storm, do you remember at Miss Lowrie's dinner-party you told me a perfectly top-hole story about a horrible black chasm where your wish comes true? I mentioned it to Lady Glen and she said you must have been pulling my leg—she never heard of such a place in her life!"

In a moment Ethan was the centre of the group. Everyone was listening for what he had to say. Indignantly he rebutted the charge of leg-pulling. "You ask Miss Lowrie if it's true or not."

"I don't believe it," cried Mollie; "if it is true, why did I, bred and born in Balderston, never hear of it? Ethan has just invented it to make the place more interesting."

"But it's perfectly true, Mollie," put in Eleanor's deep contralto.

CHAPTER V

THE POSTERN GATE

THEN how is it we never heard of it?" demanded Mollie quite indignantly.

"Because it was a hobby of Uncle Dan's that nobody should. He had a morbid horror of trippers and paid the Pickersgills to keep it dark," replied Eleanor.

Storm laughed. "Yes, I was talking to Martin Pickersgill the other day, just at the mouth of the glen, when a tourist came up to him and asked if there were anything to see there. 'Naw, sir,' said Martin, 'nobbut a lot o' thorns an' boulders.' 'Not worth going up?' asked the stranger. 'Noways worth it, sir,' replied Martin coolly."

"Well, now," imperiously commanded Hermia, "tell them all about it, Mr. Storm—what you told me." Storm related the imputed powers of the waterfall and his audience, particularly Heather Morley and young Benson, were visibly thrilled.

"Of course, the thing to do," said Mollie thoughtfully, "would be to go all alone. It's a preposterous idea to shout out the wish of your heart with a lot of people standing round."

"Might enable you to get it," put in Flaunden. "Somebody might be listening who could pull wires for you."

"Ugh! Materialist!" from Heather. "No. Obviously the thing to do is to go alone; but couldn't we all go together the first time, not to beg boons, but just to explore, so that we should know how to get there next time?"

"I don't believe one of you ladies could get there by herself," said Storm.

"We're not ladies. We are hefty girls," replied Heather, "and where you can go, we can! So that's that!"

"In those shoes!" Storm was too contemptuous to remember to be shy.

"He thinks we sit out on this terrace in the shoes we go mountaineering in," laughed Mollie.

"He has a great deal to learn," teased Lady Glen. "But tell us how far must one walk to reach the miraculous spot?"

"The best part of three miles, unless you go on horseback. We could easily mount those who don't like so much walking."

Hermia looked coaxingly at him. "Let us have a picnic, gracious one."

"A dozen if you like," he answered vehemently. "Nothing to prevent it. Eleanor, if we go, wouldn't it be a good notion to picnic at or near Garron Bridge? There's a sunny glade there——"

"With pale-blue campanulas," replied Eleanor warmly. "A charming idea. Do let us go."

"Garron Bridge!" echoed Sir Tom. "A good way from here."

"Yes, the fall is in a very out-of-the-way place; but the cars can take us and the provisions all the way

to the bridge, and we might send up horses in readiness to carry those that don't care to walk after lunch!"

"To-day's the ninth," said Eleanor, "two days more before the twelfth, and the weather seems fine. Let us do it, Ethan, without delay."

"Which direction is it from here?" asked Hermia of Storm.

"If you would stroll round the house with me, I could show you just where the glen lies."

She held out her hands. "Pull me up."

Crimsoning to his forehead, Storm grasped the firm little hands and drew her to her feet. For a moment they stood confronted, and it is possible that his soul flashed some kind of wireless message through his kindled eyes, for she said with a smile: "You are strong!"

They went off together, disappearing round the end of the ancient pile; and four pairs of eyes followed them speculatively. Uncle Joe in a frantic hope which he hardly dared to form; Lady Glendavid wondering whether there really might be a chance; Heather Morley with a swift realisation that the rich man had no eyes for herself; and Eleanor with a sense of impending doom for which she could hardly account.

The east side of the castle, along which they now were passing, was far more ancient in appearance than the south front; and at its farther end there frowned the grim keep. Before them lay a Dutch garden, charmingly designed, from which the ground fell away in terraces.

Just short of the Keep, however, a high stone wall

jutted forward, cutting off from access the square stone tower which, but for a few windows inserted here and there by various owners from time to time, looked much as it must have looked when first the castle was built. The wall ran outward, smothered in climbing roses, to the verge of the cliff, which at that point became precipitous; and then turned to form a quadrangular court. At the angle was a small turret, and a flight of stone steps led up to it.

"If you don't mind climbing the steps, there's a jolly look-out from there," said Storm.

"Rather nice," said Hermia approvingly, as she ascended. "I shall feel like a mediæval lady searching the landscape for the tip of her husband's pennon, moving among the trees! Oh!"—with a breath of excitement, as she reached the top—"what a gorge down there! What dark pines! And how loud the torrent sounds!"

"Yes, for such a small beck, it makes a good deal of noise," replied the man, hardly able to speak at all, for the excitement which pulsed in him as he found himself there beside her, his arm touching hers as they leaned over the parapet together and he pointed out to her the fold in the distant fells wherein lurked the magic falls. From where they stood it could be seen that the enclosing wall had another little tower, but ruinous, at its farther end, whence it doubled back and passed behind the Keep, thus enclosing a small courtyard, in the farther wall of which was a postern gate.

"How curious!" murmured Hermia. "Where can that gate lead to? There must be a precipice outside it."

"It's a very steep path," he said, "but you can get down."

"I should like to go!" she cried; and he answered under his breath:

"When? Now?"

"Can we get down from here?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"No. We shall have to go through the house and then through the Keep itself. If you are keen, we can easily do that, but as it's Sunday it's possible that Rogers and his wife, who live there, may be out for the afternoon, in which case we shouldn't be able to get in."

As he spoke, a little door in the tower itself opened and an elderly man, looking like a man-servant, came out carrying a plate of scraps and crossed the yard to where a fine golden collie lay beside his kennel.

"Hallo, Rogers," said Storm, leaning over the inner side of the wall, "Lady Courland wants to see the path that leads down from the postern. May we come round?"

The man started nervously as he raised his eyes. Evidently visitors to the look-out were rare. He drew out his watch. "Yes, sir," he said, with some hesitation.

"Were you just going out?"

"I was, sir." Again he hesitated, then said—"if her ladyship could go down a ladder I could bring one. Save you going all the way round, sir."

"A ladder! What fun!" cried Hermia, leaning over and smiling down. Nothing male could resist that smile. Rogers, in spite of his Sunday clothes, went to a long pent-house which ran along one side

of the yard and brought out a short ladder.

It barely reached to the top of the wall and for the next few minutes Storm was experiencing such thrills as life had not previously offered, as he carefully lifted the young form of the girl, pulsing with life and vigour, and set her upon the ladder, himself holding the top while Rogers safeguarded her descent from below.

In a moment he had followed and they stood side by side in the enclosed space.

"Thank the fates I wasn't born in the days when the ladies of the castle were pent up in a place like this!" cried Hermia.

"There might be worse fates," said Storm gravely.

"If so, I'd sooner not know about them," she replied in tones of disgust. "Ugh! I feel trapped! That wall must be an immense height!"

"Eighteen feet!" said the exact Storm. "There used to be a platform running round inside—see—there are the corbels which supported it. Thence the garrison could shoot through the loop-holes."

"And now the roses have invaded it," murmured the girl, gazing upward at the thick clusters of American Pillar and Dorothy Perkins which hung above the stark, rough stone.

The sound of a huge lock being shot back caused her to turn, and she saw the postern door open and a vista of dark wood clothing the gorge.

"What a place!" She could hardly believe in the path of which he had spoken until she reached the doorway and saw a winding flight of steps curving downward.

"Thanks, Rogers," said Ethan, "you can shut us out, we will go home through the grounds."

"Right, sir," said Rogers benevolently, "and some day you must bring her ladyship to look at the bloodstain on the stairs."

"I should think so!" said she, turning round and nodding her dainty head in the friendliest way. They heard the door closed behind them and the rasping of the heavy bolts within. "Who's Rogers?" she asked, threading her way downstairs.

"An old servant of the Colonel, pensioned off. His wife and he live in the Keep."

"Fancy living in a Keep!"

"Oh, it's been horribly modernised inside. The Garrons, to whom Romaldscar belonged, had an enormous family about a century and a half ago and they used the interior of the Keep for bedrooms. They seem to have been a delicate lot, for they all died off, and Colonel Brice, the only son of one of their granddaughters, came into the whole thing. There's nothing to see inside except the bloodstain."

"Whose blood?"

"I believe the blood of a young Garron who was slain by his own father for having been instrumental in the capture of Mary Queen of Scots. But the story is very vague. There's no historical evidence to show that any of the Garrons were concerned in the plotting at that time——"

She broke in with an "Oh! Oh!" of pure pleasure. They had come down some way by a path which broke into steps here and there and now were crossing the torrent, high above it, by means of a narrow rustic

bridge. It was a lovely dell and its apparent wildness had been carefully cultivated.

"In spring time it's a mass of rhododendrons and azaleas," said Storm, "this isn't the flowering tree time, but the weigelas and buddleyas are rather good, are they not?"

Her evident admiration of the place delighted him. He led her to their left, whence one could ascend by a rocky path which had been so admirably designed that it was not very tiring. At the top there was a high oak palisade with a gate in it which he opened with a key from his pocket, and they came out, after walking some way through the woods, into the drive at the foot of the castle.

As they entered the hall, Eleanor Lowrie rose from a low chair.

"Why, where *have* you been?" she asked. "Sir Tom and Lady Glen have driven your uncle home, Lady Courland, and the car is coming back for you."

"Is that so? Then you needn't go back till later—you can stay the evening with us, can't you?" cried Storm eagerly.

Hermia hesitated. "How can I? I've no clothes —"

"But that's quite all right—we don't change on Sunday nights—we just have supper! Wait a minute, I'll ring up and arrange with Lady Glen! Have they got home by now, Eleanor, do you think?"

"Oh, yes. They left more than half an hour ago."

He darted to the telephone room and reappeared in a few minutes, beaming. "I've told them. They'll send over for you about eleven," he said.

"Good work! We can have a dance in this hall—I see you've got a gramophone!" cried the Countess.

Storm's radiant face clouded slightly. "Dance?" he echoed doubtfully, "on Sunday night?"

The girl's face of blank amazement startled him. Then she laughed. "Oh, you English! But you know you *are* funny," she said contemptuously.

"English yourself," retorted Eleanor, approaching her with a smile. "Are you regretting that you said you would stay? Anyway, it's gayer here than it would be at Lancemoor this evening, isn't it?"

"You're right there," with a little laugh. "Oh, but it is *triste* at Lancemoor! After Wednesday, when the guns come, it won't be so bad, let us hope——"

"Come upstairs with me," said Eleanor, "and take off your hat."

She slipped her hand into the girl's arm and turned towards the stairs, smiling mischievously at the deeply discomfited Ethan, who stood irresolute in the centre of the hall.

"But do tell me," begged Hermia as she passed him, "why may one drive in a car on a Sunday and not dance? I can't see at all!"

CHAPTER VI

A MALE OLD MAID

AS the two women approached the stairfoot Mollie Verner came running down and Eleanor, with a word of explanation, handed over the guest to her.

Then, as the two mounted and disappeared, she turned swiftly to Ethan and said with a short laugh of vexation:

"Well, you haven't wasted much time!"

"Wasted time? In doing what?" he asked, bewildered.

"In taking Lady Courland to the Keep."

"How did you know?" he asked quickly.

"I was looking out of the window and watched you go up the steps to the look-out. So I went upstairs to my room and saw that Rogers brought a ladder and let you both down inside. How much did she see?"

"Eleanor!"

His tone was hurt and so full of pride that Eleanor pulled herself up. Jealousy was making a cat of her, she told herself.

"Surely," said Ethan stiffly, "it is far better to make no mysteries? Lady Courland wanted to go down from the postern, through the woods, and we went."

"She must have been a little surprised at the high palisade and the locked gate."

"She didn't seem so. Nothing was said about it."

Eleanor coloured. "Forgive me, Ethan. I—I ought to have known better. I was frightened, I think, by what you said to me in London about wanting to tell your wife."

He grew pale at the lightly-spoken word. "When I have a wife we will discuss that," said he nervously.

"There will be no need," she broke in quickly, "for there is no question for discussion. You know yourself that such an idea is most dangerous and you will not push me too far." She spoke in a low voice, staring at the ground, and he looked at her in astonishment.

"*Push you too far!*" he echoed. "Are you suggesting that I might go back upon my oath?"

She tried to dismiss it. "Oh, rubbish, Ethan! Let us say no more about it. You are right. Nobody ought to have any idea that there is anything to conceal. I'm nervy. Been too long in London. Forgive my ill-temper."

"I can forgive any amount of that; want of confidence I confess I should find much harder to get over."

His tone showed him wounded and she was remorseful. "Don't be touchy, please," she pleaded. "I really thought that you had taken Lady Courland into the Keep by the back way and it did not seem prudent. I think you are right, there was no reason why she should not see the woods and it prevented questions or discussion. But why take her to the look-out at all?"

"To show her where Great Boon Ghyll lies."

"Of course. There is a very good view from thence. Ethan—forgive me! I'll be ever so nice to her this evening?"

His brow cleared. "Will you? I want that more than anything—that you should be nice to her. She seems to me never to have had a chance." His voice melted, his eyes grew soft. Eleanor's heart failed her. For the life of her she could not say one sympathetic word. After a dreadful pause he went on, like one struck suddenly by a new thought. "I think you're a wonder, Eleanor. I haven't reflected upon what it must be to you to come here, no longer as mistress—to have a chit like Mollie taking the lead in your old home——"

She was relieved at this switching off to a subject that was by no means sore. She had always prided herself that she was not petty. "Mollie? The darling child," she laughed, "why, she comes to me for everything! She actually fought to have me take the head of the table, but I made her see that that was impossible. She is the dearest thing and we get on excellently. Don't you worry about her."

"What's the betting," said Bill Verner later, to his wife, "that Lady Courland has her way and that old Sobersides allows dancing this evening?"

"I'll give you any odds you like that he doesn't," was Mollie's swift reply. "I know Ethan. You'll no more move him when once he has put his foot down than you'll move Mickie Fell."

"Ever read Mansfield Park?" asked Bill. "Remember the private theatricals and Miss Crawford making the solemn Edmund take the part?"

"Hoots!" said Mollie, "the mild Edmund Bertram is nothing like our dour Ethan! I pity his wife, for under all that shyness of his there's an obstinacy that would make a mule feel small."

"I've been up against it myself once or twice in days gone by," replied her husband, "but you overlook the fact that he's in love and love has made him a tame snake."

"D'you mean that you'll bet?" asked Mollie, eagerly. "A genuine, honest bet?"

"Two to one in half-crowns," was Bill's offer.

"Done!" said his wife with an eagerness which made him apprehensive. Yet he could not believe that any man so obviously in love as Storm could resist the invitation of his beloved to take her in his arms and move round the room to music.

Mollie won her bet, nevertheless. Storm would not give way.

Young Benson laughed at Hermia's vexation. "You don't know old Thunderstorm," said he, "I was in his form at Balderston and I know what I'm talking about."

"Thunderstorm, you called him?"

"Yes. That was his nickname. Thun for short. Old Thun was the rock we all split against; and you know, for all his gentle voice and shy sort of manner, he's got the temper of a tornado."

"I never would have thought that!"

"Well, you can take it from me that it's so. He kept better order than anyone in school, though he never raised his voice and always sounded as though he were afraid of being overheard. But he's one of

the best. Got me out of what might have been very serious trouble in my last year. But you may as well know that it's not a bit of good starting in to make him change his mind once it's made up. Good old Thun!"

They were sitting in the hall, round the big fire which had been lit by Mollie's orders at dusk. Storm, who had been with Lord Flaunden in the dining-room, now came across to where Hermia sat. Young Benson rose and went with Heather Morley and the Verners to play a rubber in a quiet corner. Storm sat down in his vacated chair.

"No use you coming to sit with me. I'm angry with you," said Hermia petulantly.

"I had rather that you were angry with me than that you despised me," he answered with composure, "and if I sacrificed my principles to my inclination you would naturally feel contempt for me."

"Not if you sacrificed your principles to *my* inclination! Surely anything of mine is more important than anything of yours?"

"Certainly, that is so," he replied after a moment; "but your inclination is momentary, your opinion of me may be lasting."

"Yes, it will be, I promise you! I shall never forget how disagreeable you have been to-night."

"Shall we have a dance one day this week?" he asked. "I expect Mollie could raise enough guests to make five or six couples?"

"I may not be feeling inclined to dance by then. Now to-night I am in the mood for it."

"Oh," said he unexpectedly, "I think there's some-

thing else that you like nearly as well—ragging me—eh?”

She tried to look sulky, but could not help laughing a little. “I hear that the boys at Balderston used to call you Thunderstorm,” said she, “and at first I thought it wasn’t a good name, but I see it is. Even if you don’t make much noise, you can certainly growl—and you pour cold water on everything!”

His eyes looked mischievous. “A thunderstorm is said to clear the air and I believe it has done so. Now that you know quite well that I won’t have dancing here on Sunday evening you will never waste any more time in trying to get it.”

“That’s very true. I shan’t ever come here again on a Sunday evening. There are plenty of other places to go to.”

“None so near as this is. People who live on desert islands can’t afford to quarrel.”

“Oh!” She was half vexed, half amused. “How can I quarrel with someone who refuses to do his share?”

“Mere waste of precious time, isn’t it?”

“But it’s really odd that you should be so narrow-minded.”

“I don’t think I am; but I try to be considerate.”

“How do you mean? Our dancing would not give more work to the servants?”

“No; but it would sincerely shock them. They are old-fashioned dales-people and Sabbatarians to a degree that we moderns find it difficult to understand. I have to think of the weak brother.”

"Seems a pity if you can't do as you like in your own house for fear of the servants."

"You mistake. I *am* doing as I like—but not as *you* like—that's the point, isn't it?"

"Well, naturally."

"You think it natural for me to wish to do as you like? Good! That's fine hearing. I do wish to please you and I'm glad you know it."

She said petulantly, "You slip away from under my fingers! I can't pin you down!"

"Oh," he murmured under his breath, as he rose in response to the sound of the gong, "I think you've managed that all right!"

CHAPTER VII

THE PICKERSGILLS

GARRON BRIDGE spans the Lancet Beck quite at the head of the Dale, before the ravine begins. It lies out in the sunshine and the track across is so little trodden that its cobble stones are covered with short, firm turf. In August the stream is shallow and sings softly among the boulders; but in winter a formidable mass of water is wont to rush beneath the steep grey arch.

Upon the side which faces downstream is a still legible inscription cut upon a big block of stone, to the effect that John Garron of Romaldscar built the bridge in the year 1624 in thanksgiving for the preservation of himself and his horse, who were nearly carried away by the flood.

Beside the stream a path—at first merely a track upon turf, deepening as it penetrates into the ravine—leads to the glade where Eleanor and Ethan had decided that the party should picnic.

The sun was hot enough that day to cause gratitude for the shade of the pinewoods which they soon entered. Lady Glendavid, armed with an iron-shod stick and leaning on Storm's arm, descended the slope quite easily. The path for some distance ran considerably above the level of the steeply descending

torrent and the roar of the falls below was heard only as a background of thunderous sound. The light glinted through avenues of copper-coloured pine trunks, like the pillars of a red sandstone cathedral.

The beauty of the day and the place made for good spirits. Even poor old Uncle Joe felt cheery, for there was no doubt that Hermia by no means disliked her sober lover. Since her discovery of her own inability to move him from the stand upon which he had determined, she had looked upon him with an amused kind of interest. The denial which he had found so hard had achieved an effect which a month of surrenders would have failed to accomplish.

As they approached the glade—a comparatively level space wherein pines gave way to beeches and one could see that in spring there must be a carpet of primroses—they descried through the woodland vistas a curious looking individual ascending towards them. But for his neat gamekeeper's attire he might have been a faun or creature of the wild.

His small glittering black eyes were set wide apart under brows which rose and fell like circumflex accents. His skin was berry-brown, his wide, thin-lipped mouth showed strong white teeth as he smiled. He was broad and squat, with great depth of chest and disproportionately long arms. As he pulled off his cap he showed a wide flat head, covered with thickly curling hair, through which one looked to perceive budding horns or fur-tipped ears.

"Hallo, Martin," said Ethan, who was unfolding a canvas chair for Lady Glen. "This is Martin Pickersgill," he went on, addressing the company in general,

"he'll guide us to the Ghyll after lunch. Run along up, Martin, and help bring down the hampers."

"What a curious looking man," murmured Lady Glen in Storm's ear. "I don't much like the look of him. Hardly human."

He replied in the same tones—"The old Colonel always declared that he was a son of the great god Pan! Anyhow, nobody ever saw his father. Marnie, his mother, is not a bit like him. She lived here as a girl, without brothers or sisters—quite alone, in fact, for some years after her parents' death. One day she disappeared and though they searched pretty thoroughly they could not find her. She was away about ten years and then quietly turned up again with a couple of children. She said she had been carried off by the gipsies and forced to marry one of them; but that her husband having been accidentally killed, she had made her escape from the tribe. Be that as it may, she was allowed to remain; the Colonel re-thatched her cottage for her and she seems quite content. Martin's a queer chap. She tells me he understands what animals say to each other."

"I shouldn't be at all surprised. He's not canny, I feel sure. But he inspires me with great curiosity to see his mother. I shall certainly attempt the ride after lunch."

"I say," cried young Benson, slithering down among the pine needles from the side of the ravine whither he and Heather Morley had ascended, "who's your familiar, Storm? What an unchancey mortal!"

Lady Glen recounted the mysterious parentage of Martin, suppressing only Colonel Brice's conjecture

on the subject. It was, therefore, remarkable that Benson at once rejoined, "Gipsy nothing! He's the son of one of the old hoary Norse deities with which these dales are swarming! Haven't we got Thor's Ghyll, Woden's Croft, Baldur's Dale? The gods are all here, only we can't see them."

"If a thing is there, my lad, you can see it," said Bill Verner witheringly.

"Indeed? And hear it, too, I suppose?" cried Hermia swiftly. "Can you hear what is passing in the air all about us? You know quite well that it is roaring with sound and if you had a pair of earphones you could pick it up. One day, perhaps, they'll manufacture eyephones and then we'll have the shock of our young lives!"

"Thanks, Lady Courland, for your apt defence," laughed Benson. "Verner—go to the bottom of the class!"

"Look out, Bill! Field that melon!" cried Mollie's voice from above, and a fine melon came bounding down the steep path and was duly and skilfully fielded.

"Lady Courland, I've made a nook for you here, where you can see the water," said Storm. She came to his side, wreathed one arm round the trunk of a fir and leaned over the running ripples. "What a perfect pool! It would be delicious to bathe here," said she dreamily.

There was a chuckle and she turned her head to see the curious three-cornered face of Martin Pickersgill looking up at her. He had just deposited a basket on the ground to be unpacked and was on his knees beside it. Peering from below with eyes that looked

like topaz, he murmured something to her, almost in a whisper. She started.

"What was that gibberish?" asked Storm in surprise.

"It was Spanish," said Hermia, wonderingly, "that is to say, it was the corrupt dialect they talked in a place where we once . . . Say it again! Tell me again what you said just then," she commanded.

The Faun shook his head, laughing, rose and ran away at great speed up the sharp slope for a fresh burden.

"What did you think he said?" Storm pressed her.

"I am pretty sure he told me that the fauns and nymphs *do* bathe here sometimes and he with them."

"He's mad!"

"No doubt; but he's absurdly fascinating. If fauns really came here he would be quite at home with them."

"Spanish!" said Storm reflectively. She put out her hand and lightly touched his arm.

"Don't tell the others," said she, very low. "It will make him self-conscious. How did he know I should understand? Perhaps he felt certain that I wouldn't! But if we make no fuss he may say something else, may he not?"

Storm cordially agreed. The idea of sharing a secret with her made him shiver with delight.

The lunch was quite a success and was voted a triumph for Mollie, though she declared that it was really Eleanor who had told her exactly what to bring and how to bring it, a statement which Eleanor repudiated with emphasis.

While they smoked their cigarettes afterwards, Bill put a big stone on a boulder, served out pebbles all round and started the company taking shots at it and betting on each other. Storm was annoyed to hear Hermia making wild bets and losing quite an appreciable amount in small cash. He could see that Mr. Pippin was also discomposed by these proceedings; and when she had once more to hand over a bet whose amount she had rashly doubled, he murmured to her:

"Won't you put an end to this? Your uncle doesn't like it a bit!"

"Oh, but I want a chance to win back what I've lost!" she cried. "Don't make me stop now! Where's that familiar spirit of yours? Oh, up there! Martin! Martin!" she called out and the man sprang to his feet and came running silently to her. She said a few words to him in his dialect. He nodded with instant appreciation, went a little way, his eyes on the ground, picked up a few pebbles, bent over them and whispered something. Then he placed them carefully in her hand.

She laughed defiance up at the bewildered Storm, as she transferred the stones from her right hand to her left. "I bet five pounds that I hit the mark three times in succession."

"Done!" cried Flaunden, who had been an amused witness of her wild marksmanship.

Leaning back against the tree, she flung her pebble apparently without the least care. It hit the mark amid a cry of surprise. Grinning from ear to ear, Martin ran to replace the stone. Again she threw and again she hit. This happened the third time and

Flaunden, laughingly protesting that he had not supposed that he had Black Magic to reckon with, handed over a five-pound note, which she carelessly tossed to Uncle Joe, who had been financing her. It represented twice the amount of her losses.

The others then all attacked Martin, begging for enchanted missiles. He laughed and shook his head. "They are only for the queen," he said. "I couldn't make them for anyone else."

"But why?" they pressed him. Benson even went the length of holding up a shilling. The little man shook his head determinedly, though his eyes showed longing for the coin.

"Cannot. Must not," he answered. Storm, who did not much relish the episode, stood up and said that it was time to make a start for the Ghyll.

A selection of ponies stood tethered in the glade and the ladies were all mounted, as also Uncle Joe and Sir Tom, the younger men walking.

Martin took the rein of Hermia's steed and started off in the van of the cavalcade; Storm, however, deposed him from his position and bade him go on ahead.

"Sir," said Martin firmly, "you go t'other side of the queen. Let me have her bridle. She's in danger."

"In danger! What do you mean?" queried Ethan sharply.

"Me mother says so."

"Folly! Your mother has never seen Lady Courland."

"She knows her for all that."

"Knows her?"

"Been looking to see her, weeks past."

"Folly!" cried Ethan again; but he knew that he was impressed in spite of himself.

"Where did your mother see me, Martin?" eagerly asked Hermia.

His strange, flitting smile showed and died away. He said a few words in his dialect and Ethan uneasily begged to know what they meant.

"I think he said she saw me in the smoke," said Hermia, hesitatingly, and Martin nodded. "In the watter," he said gravely.

"Does he mean the steam of a kettle?" asked Hermia, and Ethan said, "No, I think he means the smoke of the Falls. You'll see when we get down there."

They continued to descend for more than two miles, the sides of the glen growing ever higher and higher above their heads; until they reached a place where huge boulders heaped around made passage for the horses impossible.

At this point Lady Glen and Uncle Joe had to be left behind and the rest of the party took to their feet. Martin guided them in and out between the broken masses. The main falls were now above them and the sound descended in a hollow roar, but the water itself was invisible. The sides of the gorge were closing in upon them, the bright sunlight hardly penetrated the depths of the narrow cleft. The going was difficult and Mollie began to wonder aloud how she would ever get up again, but Ethan told her she

would not have to do that. The horses would meet them not very far below the Ghyll.

Presently they halted and the ladies put on their raincoats, for they found themselves sprayed all over by water that descended in clouds from a multitude of tiny runlets. Still they went down and still blacker and more portentous the rock walls towered above them, till Flaunden said the going into the Inferno would now have no terrors for him.

"I feel as if we ought to see Kühleborn in a minute," gasped Heather; and almost as she spoke, from behind a black boulder rose the figure of a woman. It looked just as though she had arisen from the vapour that curled about the rocks and Mollie uttered a faint shriek, causing Ethan to go back a few steps to reassure her. The four women—Eleanor Lowrie, Heather Morley, Mollie and Hermia, stood together in a group, facing the apparition of Marnie Pickersgill. She was quite unlike her son—rather short, plump and neat, with big round eyes and a very small mouth. Her black hair was parted and waved naturally on her uncovered head and she wore a shawl which was so weather-stained that it might have been a bit of the rock itself. Her gaze was fixed on Hermia and moving forward she took the girl's hand and touched her own forehead with it.

"So here tha coom, Ladyship," said she, in a singularly sweet and full voice. "Better to-day than yesterday, for the moon's new, so happen I'll save tha, after all—but there's danger for a' that—danger creepin' nigher . . . and nigher. . . ."

CHAPTER VIII

GREAT BOON GHYLL

MARNIE!" said Storm sharply, "you forget yourself! Don't talk nonsense!"

Marnie turned slowly from her earnest contemplation of Hermia and fixed her round, steady blue eyes upon his face.

"Ethan Storm, you that sit at Garron's board and lord it over Garron's acres," said she slowly, "if you tell her not to heed what I say you will rue the day."

"I'll have no fortune-telling, Marnie," said Storm firmly. "Understand that, once for all. Neither you nor any other can predict the future. That's in God's hands."

Hermia broke into derisive laughter. "Or the devil's," said she boldly. "I've found he has usually taken the principal share in arranging my affairs so far."

"Oh, Hermia, don't!" said Eleanor in a low voice.

"Don't what?" asked Hermia, mischief alight in her half-veiled eyes. "Do you mean, don't consult Marnie? Because if so, you've got another guess coming, as they say over the water. Mr. Storm can order us about in his own house, but not out here in the open." Her glance challenged Ethan's as she pulled off her glove and exposed her hand, palm up-

permost. "Come, Marnie," said she in honeyed accents, "take me where nobody can overhear us and let me know the worst!"

Marnie shook her head, smiling oddly as she stared at her with blue, fathomless eyes, in which the pupils were mere pin-points. To those watching she conveyed the impression of being able to read the mind of the girl before her like a printed page. Presently she made a motion with her hand as though she would say— "Don't move! Don't speak!" In this gesture she seemed to include Storm, who stood close to Hermia, not irresolute, but for the moment at a loss.

The hypnotic gaze of the clairvoyant travelled to his face, but wavered as if encountering difficulties there and soon swept back to Hermia. Something came into her look which caused the whole party to hold its breath. It was as though, just over Hermia's shoulder, she saw something that terrified her. Gradually her small and pretty mouth opened into a round "O" of speechless horror. She lifted her hands and pressed them over her lips as though to keep back a scream, at the same moment backing a little, as though shrinking from pain or terror. So intense was the effect she created that even Ethan, though conscious of extreme annoyance, was held by its spell.

Suddenly Marnie removed her hands from her mouth and extended her arms widely, throwing back her head and closing her eyes. So completely had she succeeded in engaging the attention of her audience that when she spoke everyone started.

"Dinna do it! Dinna do it, loov!" she cried, lifting her extended hands as if in supplication.

Hermia, though interested, was the most self-possessed member of the group. "What is it that I am not to do?" she asked coolly.

"Tha mauna let the Falls hear that wish o' thine! For, so sure as the Falls hear it, tha'll get it! And then—then—so sure as tha have it, thy heart'll break, my pretty Ladyship!"

To Hermia's vexation she felt colour rush to her face. Mock as she might, she could not resist the conviction that Marnie really had seen into her heart and divined her passionate longing. Sheer impulse of self-defence caused her to laugh lightly.

"Dinna fash yersel"—is that the right lingo?" she asked gaily. "Nothing is further from my thoughts than to let the Falls or anybody else hear any wish of mine! Even if I had a wish! And the only one I'm conscious of at the moment is—tea!"

The frivolous words went far to destroy the impression that Marnie's earnestness had undoubtedly created; but Mollie cried out:

"If we are going down to the Falls at all we must go before tea, because we have to reach the place where Lady Glen and Mr. Pippin and the ponies are!"

"Then come along!" cried Hermia with a reckless laugh.

Marnie's eyes flashed. Reaching out, she caught the girl's bare hand and gripped it, muttering in a voice audible to her and Storm alone— "Tha'rt light, Ladyship, but that wish o' thine is heavy. Tha'rt nobbut a bairn when all's said, and tha cannot know—but *him*!" . . . Flinging the hand from her, she

turned fiercely on Ethan. "He's no bairn—he should know better than to be helpin' tha to that wish! Shame to tha, Storm of Romaldscar! Helpin' a maid to her doom!"

Ethan was so angry that he could hardly speak. "That's enough, Marnie! Off you go!" said he savagely. "You don't know what you are talking about! Out of my sight!"

"Oot o' tha sight, but into tha mind," said Marnie, facing him defiantly. "I've made tha gey an' angry . . . but tha'lt not forget."

With which she turned and vanished down into the twilight and spray of the gorge below.

"I think she's mad," muttered Ethan apologetically. "I didn't know she was like that or I'd not have let her come gassing about——"

"My first introduction to the lady," said Mollie with relish, "and I hope to see more of her. Ethan—why have you hitherto concealed the existence of your waterfall, your sibyl and your satyr? They are the most interesting things you have yet shown us."

"If you want to get down to the Ghyll before tea, don't talk, but come along," urged Eleanor, who was completely at home in her present surroundings and slipped in and out among the rocks with an ease which Flaunden, middle-aged and rather more weighty than he liked, admired and envied.

"Here we are!" she presently said, turning back to give a wet hand to Lady Courland. "There! Is that impressive, do you think! Look up, as high as you can!"

Grasping her long iron-shod pole with both hands,

Hermia flung back her head and gazed above her. There, as high as sight could travel, was the narrow cleft of black rock which was Great Boon Ghyll. The main body of the stream passed behind a rock buttress and was invisible from where they stood. They were in a land of murmur, spray and water-voices, with one column of water, the thickness of a man's arm, dropping perpendicularly from an immense height through a ring-shaped hole, down into hidden depths.

For a few minutes the party grouped round gazed in silence; then—"somebody try the echo," suggested Mollie.

Young Benson moved forward, scaled the rude steps which had been cut centuries before on the side of the big rock with the circular hole and stood upon the ledge near enough to touch the roaring rope of water.

"No need to speak very loud—but say something," urged Eleanor.

He cried, "Hail! Spirit of the Ghyll!"

Probably for the simple reason that he spoke the first word more loudly than the rest, the echo caught up and repeated that only. "Hail! Hail! Hail!" came back to them from the walls of the chimney. They counted seven repetitions.

The echo was singularly perfect and the effect wonderful. They tried several sentences which were more or less perfectly given back, but in a much lower and less distinct fashion.

Martin, who was with them, grew restless. He crept up to Eleanor and whispered, "They will make it angry if they ask nothing. Is no one going to beg a boon?"

Everyone unanimously cried "No!" and severally assured Martin that when they came for that purpose they should come alone. He did not seem satisfied—"Echo will not be pleased," he muttered. "Wait! I tell him something in French!" He climbed up like a cat to the pierced rock and shouted in an odd high-pitched call: "*Où est-tu? Où est-tu? Où est-tu?*" accenting the middle word.

The answer came back clear and sure; but it sounded like "Await you! Await you! Await you!"

Martin turned to his audience with all his white teeth showing. "He not angry. He will wait," said he in triumph. "You hear un—eh?"

"How can young Pickersgill know even three words of French?" asked Bill blankly.

"I think," said Hermia, "that he learnt to talk in Andorra, and perhaps the French Pyrenees, too. My father and I once lived for more than two years in Andorra and just now Martin spoke to me in the dialect they use there."

"That's very interesting," said Flaunden, "it means that Marnie must have penetrated over the seas."

"I've heard the people say that she and the boy talk some queer lingo together," said Eleanor, "but until to-day I have not believed it."

As they chatted together for a few minutes over this, they failed to note what Hermia was doing. All alone she had set her feet upon the slippery steps and mounted to the wishing ledge. There she stood, in her tweed suit, and leather cap, the colour of dead beech leaves, looking like a dryad, strangely akin to the place and its pagan attributes.

"Hermia!" cried Mollie, "look out!"

The call drew all eyes to Hermia, who was carefully propping her alpenstock in a crevice, and now turned to the vibrating, murmuring column of enchanted water, flowing within a few inches of where she stood.

"I am going to wish!" she cried, her clear voice carrying above all the chucklings and gurglings and distant roarings of the flood. "I've thought of a way to cheat the echo! Listen, all of you!"

Storm half ascended the stone steps, then halted. His first impulse was to stop her at all costs, his second that of gladness that she should defy superstition. He saw her hold her hands in the heavily drooping flow and heard her call:

"Echo! E-e-cho-o! Hear my wish! I wish that the dearest wish of my heart may come true!"

The words came back to them all with perfect clarity, the "come true" being repeated several times. "Come true! Come true! Come true!" with a dreadful kind of mockery; and there followed a peal of uncanny laughter, echoing from side to side of the gorge.

Startled, the girl stepped swiftly back, her foot slid on the wet stone, and she pitched down right into the arms of Ethan, who was standing half-way up the precarious steps. Had not his whole attention at that moment been fixed upon her, there would have been a serious accident, for his foothold was not at all good; but in the instant of time that it took for him to realise that she was going to fall, he braced himself by an involuntary effort of the muscles and suc-

ceeded in catching her without being himself thrown down. For a hazardous moment he rocked and resisted the impulse to stagger; then he was balanced and she was safely held against his heart, her little gasping mouth close to his ear.

"Good work!" cried Benson admiringly, hurrying up and extending his arms, into which the reluctant Storm carefully lowered her.

"Oh, you little wretch! What a fright you gave me!" cried Mollie.

Hermia was as white as paper, but she was on her feet and laughing recklessly.

"I thought I was a goner that time!" she panted, adding half in reproach, half in unwilling admiration, "Oh, Mr. Storm, you are *strong*!"

"That comes of trying to defy the old Norse deities," said Flaunden severely.

"That laughter!" gasped Heather, "it was weird! What could it have been?"

"What could it have been? It was Marnie, of course," said Ethan, lowering himself down the steps with some care, owing to a strained muscle in his shoulder, but in such a rage that he disregarded the pain. "To me," he went on, his diffidence for the moment wiped out by the stress of his indignation, "it is an astounding thing to witness—the way that people who don't believe that it's any use to pray to God will put their trust in any chance devil or fake that comes their way. Suppose you lose your thimble, I suppose there isn't one of you who wouldn't sneer at the idea that St. Anthony could, if appealed to, help you find it; but you all have a sneaking belief

that Woden or Thor, or whoever it is that presides here, could grant you a wish!"

"Then," broke in Hermia, "if you wanted anything very much, you wouldn't come here to get it?"

"No thanks, I know a much surer way to obtain my petitions," he rapped out harshly.

"I wonder you don't abolish the Pickersgills and let anybody who likes wander up the glen. The legend would then be very soon disposed of," said Flaunden.

Eleanor put in a word. "Colonel Brice was much attached to Marnie," said she quietly, "and I know Ethan would do nothing that seemed like flouting his memory."

"Oh, quite . . ." murmured Flaunden apologetically; but Storm was still perturbed—or, as young Benson whispered to Heather Morley, "the storm was still muttering in the hills."

"As long as Marnie is here, she has to behave herself," he declared. "She's preposterous, she goes too far—faking that laughter——!"

As he spoke, Marnie made her appearance in their midst, so suddenly that it almost seemed unnatural, though the tumbled boulders among which they stood made it easy for anyone to approach unseen. She was quite serene and unruffled, and went right up to Ethan and Hermia, though he called to her impatiently: "Get out, Marnie! No more of your hocus-pocus!"

She waved an indifferent hand in his direction, as though dismissing a troublesome child; and turned to Lady Courland, her head slightly on one side, a curious smile upon her lips.

"So her ladyship thought she could cheat those who grant the Great Boons?" said she, delicately ironic. "She was wrong. Those who give the Great Boons have cheated her. Whatever her ladyship has, or has not, in this life, the thing she just now wished for can never be hers. Never! Never! Never!" As she reached her climax she raised her voice in a way that must have been carefully practised; for while there was no perceptible echo to the rest of her speech, the gorge gave back the last word in its sevenfold repetition.

"Never—never—never—never—never; ne-ver—ne-ver!"

It seemed to Ethan that Hermia flinched and grew pale as the uncanny iteration died away. He made a movement forward, to drive Marnie away; but instantly the girl, with both hands, gripped his arm, and under the thrill of her touch he stood still.

Marnie's eyes had put on their blank, hypnotic gaze. She spoke without gesture, her arms straight at her sides.

"Death very near," she murmured, "death and love jostling one another—touching you close—close—in the house with a window that looks out upon the sea . . . that I see clearly . . . and I see danger . . . in the secret room where the snakes coil on each side of the hearthstone——" Hermia felt Storm start, but did not see his swift glance at Eleanor—"danger and many tears. There is none that shall brave the powers of the Ghyll and not suffer for it . . . and you must suffer . . . only one could save you, and he has just done the ill thing—the thing that must help

you to your doom." She passed her hand over her eyes. "That is all I can see to-day. The veil drops—it drops. Remember! Remember the wish that was never uttered and the doom that will take you because of that . . . the doom that must be endured."

As before, some magnetism in the speaker held the whole company silent until her voice ceased. When she turned her back and went, they shouted after her and Benson and Heather set off in pursuit, wild to have their fortunes told.

They did not find her. The moment they were gone, Hermia raised to Storm a face full of defiant laughter.

"You never supposed that I was taking her seriously? Oh, la, la! Such a stereotyped old tale! Love and death and danger and tears, in a house by the sea! Well, I hate the seaside and never go there, so you may be easy on that score! Come! I believe she has succeeded in frightening you, hasn't she?"

"Believe me, my anxiety is for you," replied he, taking his cue from her and smiling. "If you can laugh at her, all is well"—but he was conscious of a certain uneasiness; for he knew a room wherein a snake in stone was carved up the pillars that supported the mantelpiece, and although, to his relief, nobody asked any inconvenient questions, he wished very sincerely that it had not been mentioned.

CHAPTER IX

THE RED HEART

AS Hermia and Storm left the place and were turning into the path, below the Ghyll, which led to the tea rendezvous, the faun-like Martin approached them and, glancing askance at Storm as though in fear of a scolding, handed to Hermia an envelope which he held in his hand, saying a few words in his dialect. The moment that she had taken it from him he ran away.

Hermia laughed. "He says his mother has sent me an amulet," said she. "What a flattering interest she seems to take in me! Why, I wonder, did she single me out as the recipient of her gloomy prophecies?"

"Because you ventured to trifle with the Luck of the Ghyll."

"No, no! She was warning me and threatening me before that—you know she was!"

"Oh, I think you asked for it! You took off your glove and suggested that she should read your hand. She doesn't like being taken for a common fortune teller."

"Was that it? Then she agrees with you. Were you in earnest when you said you would not beg any boon at the Falls."

"Quite."

"You think it superstitious?"

"I wonder you trouble to put such a question. If praying to a false god be not superstition, what is?"

"How do you know that the old Norse gods are false?" she demanded boldly.

"I have fully made up my mind on that question," he replied, with a slight smile, "are you still undecided?"

"I don't suppose I believe in God at all," she told him defiantly. "Certainly not a God who answers prayer."

"That," he returned, quite tranquilly and not at all shocked, "is because you have never prayed. Nobody who has once sampled the almost terrible power of prayer can afterwards disbelieve in it. Did you ever come across these lines:

"God answers sharp and sudden on some prayers
And thrusts the thing we have prayed for in our face
A gauntlet with a gift in't; every wish
Is like a prayer, with God."

Hermia's face changed and softened. "Every wish is like a prayer with God," she repeated under her breath. "Oh, do you think that's true?"

"I'm sure it is; which is why you must never go to the devil to grant wishes. . . . But forgive me for talking in this strain at a picnic." There was something gently tolerant in his voice. It was as though he said, "Poor untaught child, you have much to learn, but I cannot blame you for an ignorance which I know is curable and which I myself hope to cure."

Hermia resented the unspoken words, but one cannot reasonably refute what has not been asserted; and when he went on:

"Let us see what Marnie has sent you," she accepted the change of subject, and unfolded the little package which Martin had given her. It contained a lump of cornelian, about the size of a large acorn, but shaped like a heart. It was an exquisite bit, almost ruby-red and polished finely. A hole was pierced in it.

Words were written upon the paper containing it:

"So long as you wear this the Luck of the Ghyll will protect you and the worst can never happen. Whatever you do, you must not lose it."

The girl stood with lowered eyes, gazing at the charm, which lay like a drop of bright blood upon her palm. Storm had stooped to pick up the wrappings she had let fall. He did hate to see torn paper lie about on his property. When he rose, he contemplated her with an air of mixed amusement and anxiety, curious to see how she took it. Presently she looked up, eagerly, like a child and laughed as if apologising for herself.

"Rather nice of her, don't you think? You'll jeer at me, but I'm going to own that I'm rather relieved to have it. I shall do as she tells me and wear it. Now hoot!"

"On the contrary, I shall be quite pleased for you to wear it," he replied, "and no doubt Marnie will be hugely gratified." He did not tell her that the red heart, pierced with a hole, was the crest of the Garrons of Romaldscar.

When later they assembled for tea, on a grassy

bank just outside Marnie's cottage, whence Martin carried huge kettles of boiling water and piles of newly-baked scones, the talk was naturally of the remarkable mother and son.

"Mrs. Verner's right," said Benson, "she is like a sibyl. I thought of the oracle in the Delphic cave. I could picture what the text-books called mephitic vapour rising all about her and causing a kind of intoxication."

"She gave me the creeps," said Heather Morley.

Hermia turned eyes full of malice and amusement upon Ethan, cutting cake. "What made you so furious with her—*Thunderstorm?*"

He looked up, certainly not displeased at this freedom, and spoke banteringly, which was by no means his usual habit.

"Obviously Benson has been telling tales out of school!"

"He has. What shall we do in revenge? Drag him back to the fatal spot and bind him captive there until he has uttered the dearest wish of his heart with all of us listening? Do let us!"

"I'll save you the trouble by divulging it now," said Benson coolly. "The dearest wish of my heart is ten thousand a year certain and I don't care who knows it."

"Tush! You have no soul," said Flaunden.

"His soul is like my heart—non-existent," laughed Hermia.

"Oh, I think you have a heart all right, Lady Courland, only you don't keep it in Mickleshire."

"You mean," said Bill Verner, "that she doesn't wear it on her sleeve."

"Thank you, Mr. Verner," said Hermia. Then to Storm—"You ought to have said that, you know."

"Ought I? It seems too obvious. I always want to say something really original and while I am searching for it the moment passes."

"Dangerous habit that," observed Sir Tom, "and to me it sounds unlikely. A man with your speed on the trigger should be able to loose off a *bon mot* a minute."

"I say, are you a swell shot?" asked Flaunden, betraying surprise.

"He's a wonder," said Bill. "Always was."

"But then, I've shot the Romaldscar moors ever since I was a boy," said Ethan. "Colonel Brice gave me my first gun."

"You and Garry the same day. You started together," put in Eleanor.

"Garry was a fine shot, too," said Bill, "but not such a dead cert as old Ethan."

"Who was Garry?" asked Hermia.

"My brother," replied Eleanor in a low voice.

Hermia sensed tragedy in the quiet words and asked no more. After a momentary pause Sir Tom spoke. "You told me you are expecting a couple of guns to-morrow, Storm? Anybody I know?"

"I'm not sure, I think most of you know them both. Mrs. Belton is coming. She's an acquaintance of some years' standing—had a nephew at Balderston, in my form, and used to come down to see him on speech days. When I went to London last June she was good enough to look me up and I was very glad to find that an invitation here this autumn would be welcome.

She's bringing Hawthorne, who, as most of you know, is pretty high up in the Air Force. She tells me he's a crack shot; and she's also bringing a Mr. Dinsmore, who is, I understand, related to Lady Courland."

In his simple and direct fashion, Storm dropped this bombshell into the atmosphere of happy carelessness which was lulling Hermia's friends. Lady Glendavid was so taken aback that she ejaculated: "What's that you say?" in tones of dismay before she had time to reflect.

"Dinsmore—Guy Dinsmore—and Harry Hawthorne," explained Storm painstakingly.

"Well," was Flaunden's comment, "she's bringing 'em both. I should think that a risky game—eh?"

"Since Hawthorne is coming, he must be desperately in earnest," observed Sir Tom. "He was first favourite until Dinsmore cut him out."

"Oh," scornfully from Mollie, "but Dinsmore's nobody! Surely Nora couldn't hesitate between those two."

"Nobody, you call him!" cried Sir Tom, grimly jocular. "He's next heir to our Countess! If she had succeeded in tumbling into Great Boon Ghyll this afternoon——"

"It would have been a Great Boon to Dinsmore," laughed Benson. "As Lord Courland, he could probably outbid Hawthorne."

"And then," murmured Heather Morley, "he's so handsome—preposterously handsome, if you know what I mean. I should back his chance. Poor Nora, having married once for expedience, will please herself next time."

Hermia let them talk. In the insolence of youth and beauty, she felt able to defy the power of Nora Belton, who was as old as Eleanor Lowrie.

Neither Lady Glendavid nor the miserable Uncle Joe could say a single word. They saw their carefully laid plans smashed to atoms in a moment and by the hand of the very man most concerned. Lady Glen glanced at Hermia. Her face was transfigured, illumined in its gladness. She was leaning towards Storm, talking, teasing, bewitching him with her radiant charm; and he had himself, of his own free will, done that which would ruin his chances!

Later, with blank faces, Uncle Joe and her ladyship confronted one another. "If I had had an inkling that such a thing could happen, I would have warned him," groaned the kind woman. "But I had none. Well, it's done now!"

"Yes." The voice sounded hollow, like the voice of a lamenting ghost. Mr. Pippin was hard hit. It was but two days ago that he had written to some of his more pressing creditors to assure them of his niece's approaching marriage to a wealthy landowner. Had Lady Glendavid known his exact financial position, she would have been even more disturbed than she was.

"I suppose," murmured Mr. Pippin, "there's nothing we can do about it?"

"Nothing but to trust Mrs. Belton," retorted her ladyship dryly. "If she means to marry Dinsmore, she won't allow Hermia to do so. In fact, knowing what I do of him, I don't for a moment suppose that Guy would *marry* Hermia even if Nora were not in

question. No. What I fear much more is that he will so monopolise Hermia as to prevent Mr. Storm from coming forward. Oh, what a pity! What a wretched muddle! I suppose that Nora Belton has no notion of Hermia's being in these parts. I don't think she would bring Guy here if she had."

"Then"—eagerly—"she may send him off when she finds out—or go herself and take him with her?"

"It's possible. The gods send that she does. Everything going so well, it is maddening to have this happen; and I can't say a word to Storm——"

"You can't?"

"No. Because he would say that Lady Courland must have freedom of choice. I know the man. He would a dozen times rather not have her at all than only have her because she couldn't get Dinsmore."

Uncle Joe groaned. This sounded worse and worse. "But that's the only chance he has," he said despairingly. "She'd treat him like dirt if she was sure of Guy; but she has just sense enough to know that she's got to marry someone."

"She must be mad if she thinks Guy would marry her and sit down with her to starve in a corner of Courland Meynell," said Lady Glen shortly.

"So you'd think; but she's fair potty about him. You can't say what a girl won't do when she's that way. Look at her this evening—singing about the place—bursting out with her nonsense—in such spirits she don't know what she's saying, half her time—all because she's heard that he's coming."

"Hopeless!" was the disappointed lady's final comment.

CHAPTER X

THE STATE APARTMENT

IT was pouring; not a steady downpour, but a violent storm of bitingly cold rain, driven by a furious wind. Shooting was out of the question and Hermia was desperately bored. The only additions to the Lance-moor party which the twelfth had brought were a married couple, Colonel and Mrs. Hay, both of them middle-aged. The Glens, Uncle Joe and these two were quite content to take a day off, to idle and play bridge. Hermia felt that escape was imperative.

She had whiled away a couple of hours upstairs with her maid, being manicured and having a face treatment; but what was the use of that, she dismally asked herself, if there was nobody to see her? She experienced that feeling of being "all dressed up and nowhere to go"—which is so depressing to the socially minded.

Her delicate features were set in something nearly approaching a scowl as she came downstairs about half an hour before lunch to search for a novel to enable her to forget her troubles for a while. There was a small library, looking on the drive, where there were bookshelves and a store of not very modern fiction. As the room had a north aspect the Glendavids seldom used it. Everyone was at the moment

sitting near a fine wood fire in the south-facing morning room. As Hermia listlessly ran her glance along the shelves, she heard the murmur of an approaching car. In that complete solitude the sound of wheels was quite exciting. Even if it was only the grocer. . . .

From the window she saw, to her delight, Guy's well-known two-seater, with himself at the wheel. In an instant she had darted from the room, flown to the front door and opened it before Dinsmore could summon a servant.

"Hail! Hail!" cried she. "I feel like a marooned sailor who sees a ship approach. One more hour of solitude and I should have breathed my last!"

"I thought you'd be feeling a bit under the weather and I've come to fetch you. Is it possible to carry you off without any of your elderly escort? We want to frivel a bit over there. Molly and Nora are getting up indoor sports. I'll run you home to-night, so the Glens' fat shover needn't come out in the rain."

"Splendid! If I may come just as I am, Meakins shall pack me an evening frock and I'll steal away without saying anything about it, leaving a message to say I've gone! If you don't make any noise, they'll never know you are here! Go into the library, or, better still, wait in the car; I'll be as quick as I can."

The girl who flew upstairs and burst into her bedroom was quite unlike the sulky beauty who had left it so recently. "Meakins, be as quick as lightning! Pack me things for this evening and help me to slip off! Then, when I have gone, take a polite message to Uncle Joe, to the effect that I am pressed for time,

because they are waiting lunch for me at Romaldscar, so that I had to go off without saying good-bye. Say they sent a car for me, but don't say that Mr. Dinsmore came."

The flight was accomplished successfully. Within a quarter of an hour of the car's arrival, the two were off and Meakins made her way demurely to the morning-room and gave her message.

Uncle Joe and Lady Glen listened eagerly. "Was there anybody in the car that came for her ladyship?" asked the latter.

"No one but the chauffeur, my lady," said Meakins, as she noiselessly withdrew.

One of the footmen, however, had been cleaning silver in a pantry overlooking the drive and he informed Mr. Pippin that Mr. Dinsmore had come in his own two-seater and that Lady Courland had admitted him herself. Poor Uncle Joe carried the news to Lady Glen.

"I thought there must be something, her slipping off so quiet," he remarked drearily. His friend reassured him. Even though Guy had fetched her, their destination was Romaldscar; and, there, were both Storm and Mrs. Belton.

At their first meeting after Nora's arrival, Lady Glen had felt quite certain that Guy was the lady's destined husband and that she had brought Major Hawthorne merely as a pace-maker. Moreover, there seemed no room at all for doubt of Storm's intentions. Thus she felt that rival forces would probably drive Hermia into the right fold in spite of herself. Uncle Joe, perhaps from a longer experience of his lovely

niece, was less sanguine, though he still clung to hope.

Meanwhile, the two in the little car were bubbling over with the relief of youth and folly at finding themselves free. It was not a day for even lovers to linger on the road. The rain came sluicing down so that the screen-wiper took up most of the driver's attention; but they babbled together like two who spoke each other's language in a strange country.

"What an awful thing it would be to have to live hereabouts, wouldn't it?" remarked Guy. "Storm has to stick it for half of each year. Fortunately, he's nearly done his time this year and he'll be able to go away for the winter. But it seems to me that it rains nine days out of every ten in these parts; and what in the wide world can one find to do?"

"What does Mr. Storm do?" asked Hermia. "He never seems bored."

"Oh, he and young Benson pore over little plans drawn out on oiled paper—plans for cottages. There are so few people in Lancekirk that he has already built them more than they need, so he is going to make a whole new group of workmen's dwellings at Balderston."

"It must cost a lot of money!" mused Hermia.

"So I said. His reply was that he had about twice as much money as he could spend and he must do something with some of it."

"Mercy! He might give some of it to us!" cried the girl with a bitter little laugh. "We'd know what to do with it, shouldn't we?"

He turned glowing eyes upon her. "Wouldn't we just about! How rotten life is! Think of that stuffy

old johnnie with everything the world can give and going about playing harmoniums and having family prayers! And think of us! If we were in a romance, you would have had the title and I the money, or vice-versa—then there would have been no trouble! Whereas, in fact, we are both paupers and must move along the track necessity pushes us into! You will spend your time laying the foundation stones of endless rows of concrete cottages and opening village bazaars; and I——”

“Yes? This is most interesting! What will you do?”

“Cadge for invitations to dine with you and try to persuade your husband to let me manage his finances.”

To his astonishment, Hermia sighed audibly. “If there is anything in prophecy, you are all wrong about me, Guy. I am in for tears and trouble, and death is all about me.”

“What are you talking about?” he cried angrily. “Who told you any such thing?”

She laughed, but there was uneasiness behind her flippancy. “A wise woman that I wish you could see,” she replied. “But I really don’t know that you could get there—it is miles from everywhere and all surrounded with brakes and thickets like the palace of the Sleeping Beauty. Don’t laugh, but I am really inclined to believe that that woman, Marnie Pickersgill they call her, has magic powers. One day I’ll tell you all about it—as it is, we are at our journey’s end already!”

There was certainly more life about Romaldscar than she had left at Lancemoor. The door stood open

and Mollie was on the look-out. Her call brought others to the spot and there were hospitable greetings and cries of triumph.

"He's got her! Good work!" and so on.

The party was augmented by four young people from a neighbouring estate, whom Mollie and Bill had been over to fetch, and as Hermia emerged from the car she felt that life still had compensations.

Perhaps the only person who was discontented was Nora Belton.

She was a handsome warm-tinted brunette and everything that clothes can add to a woman was carefully made use of to enhance her charm. She was, however, nearly ten years older than the Countess and just missed that careless perfection which formed a kind of aura in which Hermia moved.

This wet afternoon, Lady Courland was fairly radiant. The two Halkett girls, who were pretty enough, seemed washed out and dowdy beside her. The programme for the afternoon, comprising billiards, bowls (in the hall), ping-pong, bridge and jigsaw puzzles, divided the company in different rooms. Somehow, Guy Dinsmore was always in the same room as Hermia.

Eleanor Lowrie had seen to that. With all her deep intensity of determination she had willed that Ethan should never be thrown away upon "that fast, empty, little thing." She bent her intellect to the arranging of the different heats, so that Mrs. Belton should always be playing in a different part of the house. During the planning out of the entertainment that morning nobody had detected her design. Every-

one admired her ingenuity in arranging all so well and carefully; and not until it came to actual performance was it found that neither Storm nor Nora was ever in the same room with Guy and Hermia, except in the one heat wherein they must be antagonists.

One of the sports consisted of roaming the house to find various objects (duly enumerated on a list) which were hidden all over the rooms, passages, halls and so on. In this game, the hunters were in couples, a lady and a gentleman; and Eleanor calmly "faked" the lots so that Guy and Hermia were a pair and pursued their search together, while Nora and Storm were in the billiard-room. The things were to be sought in any room, upstairs or down, upon the door-handle of which a knot of red ribbon had been tied. In the course of their investigations, Guy and Hermia found themselves in a stately and vast sleeping apartment, with oak panelling from floor to ceiling and a wonderful carved four-poster.

"This is the kind of room in which the late Colonel Brice probably breathed his last," observed Guy, as he gazed around. "Kind of reminds me of the 'Curse of the Catafalques,' you know. Cheery sort of billet."

Hermia sank down upon the tapestried window-seat and gazed around her. The rain had ceased and a shaft of watery sunlight, striking through, gilded her Raphael head.

"Isn't it formidable?" she said dreamily. "Anyhow, Ethan Storm is wise enough not to use it! Ugh! It would give me the blues!"

"Fortunately, the rooms are not all of this type," said Guy, seating himself beside her. "I've got quite

a comfy pew myself; and Mollie Verner runs the place well, you know. Nothing to complain of in the food and so on. I suppose this is one of the state apartments."

Hermia gazed upon the paper in her hand. "We're not getting on very fast with our list," said she. "It's too difficult! What can be hidden here? A cough lozenge, a stick of sealing-wax, a coin, a needle threaded with scarlet wool——"

"In a haystack—that's where we ought to look for that," said Guy crossly. "Hallo, though, I see one thing—the stick of sealing-wax! Look! Lying on the window frame. Rather neat, that; since the glass at the edge is green, the same colour as the wax. Rather fine, the glass in this window, isn't it?"

Hermia turned listless eyes upon the stained armorial bearings in the upper panes. Then her face changed. "A red heart!" she cried eagerly—"a red heart *pierced!*—like mine!"

"Really! Is your heart pierced, Hermie? I didn't know!"

She laughed as she pulled at a very slender gold chain and drew up from beneath her gown the cornelian amulet. "Look there," said she musingly, letting it lie like a big drop of blood upon her hand. "This is my mascot—given me by that witch woman I told you of, down at Great Boon Ghyll. She said I am on no account to lose it. I didn't know it was a crest."

They pondered together over the coat-of-arms on the lower pane, "Party per pale sable and argent, on

a chief of the second, three pierced hearts proper." Under the shield was a scroll with a motto:

Cœur percé se lève.

"What does that mean?" mused she.

"That sorrow ennobles, I should think," he replied.

"Humph! I don't think it does! More usually it sours," she commented, leaning back and once more letting her gaze wander round the stately proportions of the sombre room. "I shouldn't like a room like this," she remarked, "I should always think that these oak panels were concealed doors. I should—oh!" suddenly she screamed, springing to her feet. "What's that? What's that? *Guy!*"

They both stood staring at the wall, which had opened as she spoke; through it a man had stepped into the room.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET DOOR

THE intruder was evidently to the full as disconcerted as they were. He turned with a noticeably swift movement, closed the door behind him and stood hesitating.

"Did you want anything in here, sir?" He spoke civilly, but there was suspicion in his eye. He looked like a man-servant.

Hermia had been collecting herself. "Why, it's Rogers!" said she. "What on earth are you doing here, Rogers? I thought you lived in the Keep."

The man recognised her. "So I do, my lady, but I sometimes come in to help if needed."

"And does that door lead to a passage that takes you all the way to the Keep?" cried the girl eagerly.

"No, my lady"—firmly—"it is merely a service stair from the kitchens. I was the late Colonel's valet; he slept in this room, and, as it is now unoccupied, I sometimes use these stairs as a short cut. Is there anything I could do for you?" he added, evidently much puzzled by their presence there.

"No, thanks," said Guy lightly, "we had just finished our business here—discovered what we wanted to find——"

The man went suddenly pale. "*Discovered?*" he

repeated. "There's nothing to discover here, sir. This room is never used——" As he spoke, laughing voices sounded along the corridor and in walked Nora Belton and Harry Hawthorne.

"Hallo!" they cried, "what a gorgeous apartment! Anything to be nosed out here? The red ribbon's on the door."

"Rather," said Guy, "we have just been successful. Come along, Hermie, we'll leave them to it——!"

"No, don't be so nasty. Give us a hint," urged Nora, coaxingly, bringing out her list. She was much too clever to sulk upon finding these two together; perhaps, also, too confident of Guy's ultimate intentions. "Which side of the room did you find it? You might tell us that much! Or, if not that, which of all these tricky things was it?"

"The trickiest of the lot, because it isn't the colour you expect it to be. There! That's all the help you'll get from us," retorted Guy.

In the wrangle which ensued, the mystified Rogers quietly slipped away and as soon as he was gone, Hermia eagerly whispered, "Nora! There's a secret panel here—that man came through it just now and gave us a horrible jolt!"

"Secret panel! Where? Where?" They ran with one accord towards the place at which the intruder had entered. All tried their hand at pushing back the door, but without any success. It was fast and, although they felt along every bead of the moulding, they could discover no secret spring. Hawthorne, who was interested in such things, made a careful examination, but he could not solve the problem and

Nora was eager for him to turn his attention to winning the game, so he soon desisted and Guy and Hermia went off upon their further quest.

It was but natural that, the moment the party re-assembled for tea, the exciting news of the secret panel and staircase should be loudly proclaimed by its accidental discoverers. Storm laughed at them. "The most prosaic thing," he said; "just a short way from the kitchens to the best bedroom. A service staircase, as Rogers said."

"But do show us the secret—how to open it. Come up now with me and let *me* see it, even if the others don't," coaxed Hermia, appealing to him with voice and eyes.

Storm's look dwelt upon her with that quiet fixity which she found a little disconcerting. During the past fortnight, since the arrival of Mrs. Belton and her two escorts, he felt that he had lost all the ground which previously he had gained with such pains. Hermia no longer conversed with him, her eyes, her attention, were all for Dinsmore.

The best of men is never quite without the feeling which invades one anxious to buy a property, upon discovering that someone else is a would-be purchaser. To Storm's simplicity, the fact that Guy was much struck with his beautiful cousin being evident, there naturally followed the assumption that he would marry her if he could. It seemed to the master of Romaldscar advisable to make his own desires and intentions plain to the girl without delay.

He smiled down upon her and answered. "The door cannot be opened from within the room except

with a key, and I have not the key; but if you care to come up there with me presently I will try and find it."

"Oh, thank you!" she cried, turning to communicate this news to the rest of the party."

"Stop," he put in quietly. "Only on one condition—that you come alone."

She raised her eyes to his serious face. Certainly he had handsome eyes and a finely-cut mouth. What a pity he was so dull—that his distinguished looks covered such a conventional mind! She vacillated. Curiosity burned within her. She wanted to see that door slide back! On the other hand . . . was it kind to encourage Storm?

She gazed down the room. Guy and Nora were together. Instantly the fires of that deep, fierce jealousy which she would never admit to herself flamed high and she nodded to her companion. "Now?" she whispered.

"Now," he answered: and found it hard to steady his voice for utterance.

Together they slipped away. Eleanor and Lord Flaunden were deep in a question which had arisen respecting the method of scoring; and the departure of the pair was comparatively unnoticed.

Side by side they ascended the stairs, passed along the wide gallery and once more entered the state apartment. It faced almost due south, but the oriel projected and the evening sun slanted in on its western side, burning rose-colour and turned the pierced red hearts in the window to rubies of fervent fire.

Storm shut the door behind them, laid his hand

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lightly on her arm and so guided her across to the window. They stood in that great flooding of light which was streaming across the sunset moors from above a threshold of purple storm-cloud, glorious to behold.

"Hermia," said the man gravely, "I want to give you all the keys that I control—not only the keys of my house, but of my inmost self, keys which no woman has ever held. I want you to marry me—will you?"

Hermia gasped. She had not expected this. His admiration she knew, but had relied upon his diffidence to hold him back unless and until she chose that he should advance. For this forthright and unvarnished declaration she was unprepared and for a moment she found reply difficult. To refuse Storm was to burn her boats with a vengeance; but to accept him was quite impossible.

Guy was hers; of that she felt assured. She could compel him if she would, though hitherto she had made a point of doing nothing of the kind. To engage herself to Storm was out of the question.

"Oh-h-h! How unexpected you are! What kind of answer could you expect to such a bombshell of a question?" she cried, moving away a little, with a shrug of her shoulders. "Can't you—please—talk about something else—find an easier subject . . ."

In the pause that followed her foolish words she heard presently his low voice. "I am in earnest, Hermia. Will you do me the honour to be in earnest, too? This may be just a part of the afternoon's fun to you. To me it is everything in the world."

She was ashamed. "Forgive me! If I must an-

swer, I—I can't do anything but say No. You haven't given me time to think. I don't mean to be flippant, but I . . . really I can't . . . you surely must see that I can't."

"Have I been too sudden?" he said, as if musing aloud. "But you must have known, simply because I haven't been able to hide it. Hermia, are you sure? I feel so confident that I could make you happy."

"Oh, forgive me, but I don't see what makes you think so! I'm just a worldling, a butterfly, and you are so serious, so life-is-real-life-is-earnest, are you not? I feel a strong foreboding that I should make you miserable! No! No! It wouldn't do! I simply can't. You must forgive my bluntness. I haven't said anything about being grateful for the honour and so on. I feel it all but I just can't say it. I hope you'll find some girl of solid worth who will make a suitable return for your goodness. I can't."

She showed distress and at once he turned from his own bitter disappointment to offer apology. He made her sit down and begged her pardon for his rashness.

"One thinks and thinks of nothing else in the world for weeks," he said, "and it seems so strange that, in the heart of the object of all that thought there should be nothing to correspond. I'm a presumptuous ass. Try and forgive me."

"I don't see what presumption there is in thinking too highly of me," she sighed, rather unexpectedly to herself. "If you knew what a rotter I am!"

He made a derisive sound, turned and paced away from her down the long room, to hide the working of his face.

She remained where he had left her, the ruddy light making an aureole for her exquisite head against the background of stained glass. In after days he always pictured her to himself like that.

After a minute he came back, with a face that looked drained of life and hope. "Shall we go down?" he asked.

She did not even beg to be shown the secret of the panel, which would have been so eagerly disclosed had she said Yes.

She had crossed her Rubicon and, finding herself as it were in the enemy's country, felt anything but comfortable. Could she have recalled the last few minutes she might have decided to do so; but it was too late. She saw now that she should have temporised, not blurted out so crude a negative. Could she have been certain of Guy she would not have cared, but she knew that she was not certain.

Nevertheless, she told herself as they silently came downstairs together that she could whistle back Ethan if she chose. . . . Oh, never, never! The idea of being the wife of such a man terrified her almost as the prospect of a nunnery might have done. Surely fate would not be cruel enough to make such a marriage necessary!

It was past midnight when she found herself once more with Guy in the two-seater. The night, after the day of wet and cold, was warm and exquisite, as sometimes happens on the moors. The little car was closed, the men-servants having been afraid that the rain might again come on; and in the purple darkness the two of them were there together, shut away from all the world.

"We'll make a short *détour*," said Guy easily. "It would be too tepid to go straight home on a night like this. I say—what's the very wildest part of the moor—the farthest from civilisation?"

"Garron Bridge," she answered instantly. "We can't get down the glen with the car, but even from the bridge the sound of the falls is impressive. If there was a moon we might venture down on foot——"

"Good work! Even as it is, we might possibly go a little way. Do you know how to get there?"

"Well enough to direct you, I think. When you get to the cross roads you turn to the left, over the moor. The road isn't first-class——"

"Never mind that, so long as it's wild enough——"

She laughed, an odd little excited laugh that was half a sob. "Oh, it's wild enough—savage—ferociously lonely! I'm not sure if I dare face it in the dark! I feel as if all the evil that Marnie prophesied for me might begin to creep upon me . . . and I can do nothing to stop it!"

"Girl, what's wrong? You sound as if you really meant it! I never heard such a tragic voice from you," said Guy in his tenderest tones. "Tell your old cousin all about it." He controlled the movement of the car, travelling now at a moderate pace upon an empty road, with his right hand, and passed his left arm around Hermia.

The movement with which she drew away was almost violent. "None of that, my lad! Keep your arms for your Nora!"

He growled "Guess again, Hermia! Hawthorne is more likely than I to be the recipient of Nora's

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sweetness and Nora's Chicago dollars." Then, with spirit: "I'm no tame cat and she shall know it. These rich women are the deuce! They think they can whistle you back to them whenever they choose! But I'm through. Ah, you may sneer, but I mean it. Shall I tell you what I am going to do? I'm going to find *work*! Would you think me barmy if I told you I was tired of being a rotter?"

For the moment he was sincere. It rang in his voice.

"Guy!" She said but the one word; but the lifting cadence of joy was wonderful. He could not see her face in the darkness of the car, but he bent his head and there was a pulsating silence.

"Sometimes," he muttered unsteadily, "I think it would have been better for me if I had never seen you, and sometimes—at this moment, for example—it seems as if you might——"

"Might what?"

"Convert me. Turn me into a bad copy of Storm."

"Heaven forbid!" she prayed, with a gurgle of elfin laughter; adding almost immediately, "Guy—stop! We're there! We've reached the bridge!"

The car came to a standstill. Close to them was the tumbling water which galloped, swollen with the heavy rain, under the bridge.

"We must go and look at it," he murmured, and they stepped to the ground.

Black as the pit loomed the glen on their right, dimly before them the grassy pathway across the bridge lay in the starshine.

A thousand voices—water, the night breeze, the sigh of woodland life awake and aware all about them, mingled in the muffled symphony. They sat upon the parapet of the bridge, his arm enfolding her and listened while the darkness cast about them.

“A slow arm of sweet compassion, felt with beatings at the breast.”

“Let’s venture a little way down the gorge,” he whispered at last; and it seemed that she followed without volition over the bridge, down the narrow winding track where the moss made velvet cushions for the treading of satin-shod feet.

Close together they passed into the enfolding great trees. In that temple the small wandering breeze did not enter, though it sighed above them. A fallen trunk, half sunk in moss and plumed with fern, seemed set there for their coming. They sat down, and for some moments neither spoke; only the man’s hold grew closer, the girl’s pulses beat faster . . . no words passed, but there was an imperious summons, a call, a deep, irresistible plea. . . .

Suddenly, without reason that she could assign, a deadly fear shook Hermia. She felt as though under a spell—as if her will-power were leaving her and becoming merged in that of the man at her side. Fiercely she resented that. It was for him to dance to her piping—not the other way.

Uneasily she stirred in his arms and on the movement he spoke, with an alarming softness.

“The time . . . and the place . . . and the loved one all together.”

For a moment she remained under the influence

of that hypnotic moment, as though escape had passed beyond her reach. Then, with a spring she was free of him, on her feet, and hurrying up the steep slope, back towards the bridge.

"Hermia, wait," he urged, pursuing her. The thought crossed her mind that it was foolish of her to fly—provocative; yet she could not stop. All her being seemed set upon the urgent necessity of flight. Her feet might have been winged, as sometimes they seem to be at night, and she ascended far more rapidly than she had followed the downward way.

His voice, as he hurried after, grew angry—peremptory.

"Hermia, stop! Stop, I tell you!"—and as he came abreast of her and grasped her arm—"What's the matter? Why this Early Victorianism?"

So insistently was he using his strength that she could not proceed. She felt as one may in a nightmare, as though her feet were rooted to the ground while a huge curled billow hung over her head in act to crash.

They had by that time almost gained the top and from where she stood she could see the parapet of the bridge plainly, in contrast with the profound gloom of the forest. A sudden cry left her lips—"Oh, what's that? Who's that?"

"What do you mean?" he asked irritably, suspecting her of a ruse. "There can be nobody there . . . unless it's a keeper."

"On the parapet of the bridge," she gasped; and Dinsmore turned his head and saw.

It was certainly not a keeper, but it was a man.

His limbs were bare and looked like sculpture in the glimmer of grey light. He wore what had the appearance of a garment of goat-skin and on his head was a garland of leaves.

Dark as it was where they stood, it was evident that he could see them, for he waved his hand and cried:

"Late! Late! Too late for the children of men to be abroad! Back! Back! Go back while you can! Go back!"

As he shrilled these words he turned as if to motion to someone who followed him; and slowly behind the bridge parapet there rose another figure, step by step, until it stood beside that of the half-naked faun. It was a monk, cowed and frocked in what seemed like a black habit. His cowl made his face almost as invisible as if he had had none. With folded arms he stood there motionless for what might have been a minute or might have been ten. Then with a weird cry, the faun leapt forward and disappeared as though he had jumped from the parapet into the torrent upon its lower side. Next moment the monk followed him, but more slowly.

The two spectators remained for some long moments after their vanishing, as if power of movement had left them. Then Hermia's ear discerned rustlings and stirring among the bushes lining the banks of the torrent, as though the terrible couple were forcing their way upward to where they stood.

With a moan of terror she took to her heels and, truth to tell, Guy followed almost as expeditiously. Up the hill to where the car—the earthly, friendly,

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usual car—stood awaiting them just across the narrow bridge they fled, and it was not until his hand was upon the handle of the door that Guy found voice to stammer:

“Great Scot! Who was that blighter?”

“The monk? I don’t know! But the other was Pickersgill—Martin Pickersgill! He must be stark mad! Oh, did you see him, dressed up like that?”

“Dressed? Undressed I suppose you mean! Rather a nasty form of lunacy. Does Storm know that he goes about like that, should you think?”

He had entered the car and she flung herself in after him with urgency. “Oh, Guy, be quick! Turn round! Drive me home at once—at once, do you hear? I’m afraid! I tell you I’m simply terrified of this place! Drive like mad, there’s a dear—straight back to Lancemoor—drive, drive, drive!”

CHAPTER XII

BURNT BOATS

HERMIA lay next morning among her pillows in a flood of sunshine, drinking her coffee and reading her letters in a frame of mind half ecstatic and half troubled.

There had been moments during the previous evening when her heart had failed her, but she had reached home delirious with joy, for it seemed that her boldness in refusing Storm had been justified and that Guy was hers at last. Yet, as she prepared for bed and lived over again the troubled moments of that astonishing drive, something deep within her knew that her sensation of triumph was difficult to justify.

Nothing definite had been said. Nothing in the least like "Be my wife" had passed Guy's lips.

"We are modern, we don't need to dot our i's. We understand each other," she told herself. Yet she knew that she would have felt more satisfied if they had been engaged in the old-fashioned way; and scorned herself for what she called her Victorianism.

The morning's post had brought her an invitation which rather pleased her, from a certain Lady Merri-dew, who was a niece of her late grandmother, old Lady Courland. The writer had conspicuously failed to do her duty by her young kinswoman during the

season in town, being terrified lest her younger brother might take a fancy to Hermia's beauty and Hermia's debts.

The young man in question being now safely with his regiment in India, his sister had written to suggest that Hermia might pay them a visit in Normandy, at Hardelet, where she had a bungalow which they visited every autumn. She named a date about a month distant and Hermia, although undecided about accepting the invitation, was yet glad to have it.

Little though her uncle told her respecting his financial position, she yet knew that at present their only home was the Dominoes and that it might be convenient for her to be able to rely upon an alternative. At the back of her mind was a dread which she dared not put into words. Would it not be uncomfortable to prolong their present visit now that Storm had so foolishly pushed her into a rejection of him? Well she knew that the Glendavids would be extremely angry with her.

As she meditated upon these disquieting topics Meakins came in to take her breakfast tray.

"Mr. Pippin wishes to see you, my lady."

"Oh,—tell him I am just going to get up. I can see him in an hour's time."

"He told me to say that it was *hurgent*, my lady. I think you'd better let him in."

Meakins, who never misplaced her h's, gave malicious emphasis to this one. Yet the woman's insolence was so quiet that it was impossible to take notice of it.

Hermia, with angry little protests, yielded. Surely

Uncle Joe could not already have heard? She had to own that it was just possible. It seemed to her that everybody at Romaldscar must have known it the previous night, so difficult had Ethan found it to conceal his misery.

A shudder passed through her as she raised herself higher on her pillows and pushed back her unlooped hair. The glory in her heart, the unspeakable gladness of her love, was terribly sensitive; and the thought of Uncle Joe's hand being laid upon it made her wince.

His usual shamle seemed to be intensified as he came shuffling in. His health had been improving in the fine air, with good food, luxurious quarters and a temporary cessation from care; but that morning he looked alarmingly ill and for a moment Hermia thought it might be this that was troubling him. His handful of blue envelopes, however, suggested something more.

"Morning, Nunky, dear. You look a bit under the weather," she murmured nervously.

He dragged a chair near the bedside and seated himself, panting a little. It was a perceptible time before he began to speak.

"I've just looked in," he began at last in a curious dry voice, "to tell you that we've reached the limit. You knew I was broke, but you never seemed to take no notice. Broke to the wide, I am; *and now there's a County Court summons. Two of them.* Them tradespeople over at Chelsea are all in a tale and there's some of 'em thinks, if there's assets, they'll snatch a bit before the other creditors gets in."

"Nunky! What do you mean?"

"I ain't got a penny, not even to give 'em something on account."

"But—but—why come to me? You know I've nothing—you have always known it——"

"No; but you will have. Hermie, I've come to tell you that the time of shilly-shally is over. You've got to get yourself engaged to Mr. Storm this very day."

She stared at him. "What good will that do? Am I to say, 'Yes, I'll marry you if you'll start to pay my debts at once'?"

"Don't act the fool, Hermie. If you're engaged—if the engagement's in the *Morning Post*—they'll all wait. There'll be no difficulty at all. As it is"—he broke off to fumble among his papers—"here's letters from every house-agent in whose hands Courland Meynell is, to say it's the same tale with everyone. They can't get a tenant until we modernise the kitchens and hot-water system and instal electric light plant. We can no more do that than we can fly."

Hermia lay back against her down pillows, her lovely arms behind her head. "Oh, *damn!*" she said very distinctly.

"Swearing won't do no good, my dear. You've got to act. Mr. Storm'll ask you to marry him if you so much as give him the glad eye."

Hermia took her fence blindly. "Well, then, he did ask me—yesterday"—her uncle made an incoherent crow of triumph—"and I refused him! There! Now don't speak—I forbid you to utter one word until I have said what I have to say to you."

Her order was obeyed the more literally in that Uncle Joe was rendered incapable of speech from shock. He merely groaned.

"Uncle Joe—Nunky—you do love me—you do want your little girl to be happy? Oh, listen, for pity's sake! I'm going to marry Guy. It is far more suitable. He and I are all that is left of the Courland family. It is fit and right that we should marry—and he is going to work—he is going into business—we shall get on finely! Why, old dear, you couldn't really expect me to marry that schoolmaster? He'd put me in the corner when I was naughty and lecture me gently when I said I was sorry! I'd be like the girl in the poetry:

"My right hand teaching in the ragged school,
My left hand washing in the public baths!

I can't, old dear, I simply can't; I'm not made for that kind of life——"

A sob choked her and he got in a word. "Little fool, you could change all that once you were married."

"No, no, no!" she gasped. "You don't know! It would be the other way round! *Nothing* would change that man! *He'd* change *me*! I tell you I should be a district visitor before I knew where I was! Oh, Nunky, try to put yourself in my place! Do you want to pay your debts with the whole of my future happiness? Look at me, I'm young! *Young*! I've all my life to live! If I was five-and-thirty and had had my fling I might consider Ethan Storm. But if you try to make me marry him now there will be

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the devil to pay and you'll regret it to the last day of your life!"

The man's face worked. Drops stood on his forehead. The passion of her appeal moved him terribly. "But, Hermie," he burst out piteously, "what are we to do? I ask you that—'ave you got any suggestion to put forward?"

She was shaking with emotion. "Yes. I'll marry Guy and between us we will pull together the family fortunes. You and I are in debt—granted; but for such a little! A few paltry hundreds! If we had any capital we could pay and never feel it! Guy *has* capital. He's not rich, but he has some money, you know it. He'll set us straight and let me have enough to put Courland Meynell in order. Then we'll let it on a twenty-one years' lease and live in a flat and he'll work, and by the end of the term we shall be able to go back to it ourselves! And I should be happy! I shouldn't care where I was if I was with him! I love him——"

Uncle Joe stood up. "Has he promised to marry you?" he rapped out inexorably.

"Not in so many words, but we understand each other! We both knew, last night, when we parted, that we could not part——"

"Hermie, I dunno what to say to you. You're crazy. That man'll never marry you. He don't mean to. I don't say he ain't in love with you, but he's as cunning as they make 'em. He'll just lead you on, spoil your chance with the other man and leave you in the cart. Lady Glen knows it. You ask her to tell you some of the tales she's told me about him."

"Horrid old woman, repeating gossip and scandal!" cried Hermia fiercely. "He's so wonderfully taking, it isn't surprising if a good many women have lost their heads over him; but I know . . . I feel . . . Oh, I can't make you understand, but I tell you it's *all right!* Do believe that I know him in a way Lady Glen never could!"

Mr. Pippin's face expressed despair. "Even if his intentions *was* all right, we can't live on 'em," he muttered.

"Uncle"—leaning from bed she grasped his hand—"listen to me! I'll take Agnew's offer for the Hoppner! You know the price he offered—he undertook to buy it at that figure any time I made up my mind to part with it. And why should I want to keep it? A group of my detestable ancestors, the last of whom would have let me die in a ditch——! If we sell it we shall have plenty for a sop to your creditors and to carry on for a while. I heard from Prue Merridew this morning, and she invites me to Harde-
lot next month. *Give me my last chance!* Let me telegraph to Agnew—they'll send me a cheque to-morrow; and I'll make a bargain with you. If Guy and I are not openly engaged at the end of six weeks from now I'll marry Mr. Storm! He'd come back if I called him——"

"And where do you intend to go till the time comes for your visit to Ardlow or wherever it is?"

"Why not stay here?"

"When Lady Glen knows you've turned down your only hope you may find we've outstayed our welcome."

"Then we'll give out that we are going to Harde-
lot

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at once and we'll cross to Dieppe and stay there till next month. Then I'll go on to Prue and you can come home to Marterstead. Buck up, old thing! We'll have funds to give you quite a good time at the Casino."

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In the gardens of Romaldscar, just about the time of this conversation, Eleanor Lowrie was ascending from terrace to terrace of the flower garden, her hands full of orange and scarlet blooms for the house, she having taken this duty off the shoulders of Mollie.

As she reached the terrace, Ethan, in riding breeches, came striding from the stables and she greeted him. "There you are! Only just back! My dear boy, have you had any breakfast?"

"No—that is, yes—I mean, I want nothing, thanks."

His tone was that of dismissal, but Eleanor held her ground, torn between sympathy for what he was suffering and a wild, glad satisfaction that it was over—that his madness had been checked and was on the way to be cured.

"A long gallop is a fine thing," said she gently, "and you look the better for it."

"What do you mean? There was nothing the matter with me."

"Ethan, need you pretend—*with me?*"

Her beautiful voice was tender with sympathy. He said nothing, but walked on, looking straight before him.

"Ethan—is it for nothing that you and I have been

close friends for so many years? Don't you know how all my heart goes out to you in trouble?"

He stopped short then and faced her with a mask set like iron.

"Will you accept my thanks, Eleanor, and understand, once for all, that this subject cannot be mentioned between us? So far as you know I am not an object for the sympathy of yourself or of any other person." He drew out his watch. "I am catching the midday train to Carlisle," he added quietly, "there is a Housing meeting I ought to attend and a Diocesan Conference. I shall not be back till Thursday or Friday. I know that Mollie and you will play hostess for me. Good-bye."

With that he left her and she was too stunned to speak or to remonstrate.

Thinking back over the actual words spoken, she hardly knew how she had gathered from them the sense of utter finality which she had received.

She stood where he had left her, the water brimming in her soft, deer's eyes. She knew she could have given him all that a man may ask, and she knew also that she was to him merely an intrusion and an offence, that the only feeling she aroused was an irritation which he could hardly control.

Something in the life of Ethan Storm was over. Without being told, she knew that this was a "one-woman" man—that never again would the feeling excited by that shallow little worldling blossom in his heart. He rejected her and her love as though they did not exist. Here was no heart to be caught on the rebound. She was put outside and the door was shut,

the key turned. She knew clearly and without hope that it would never again be opened to her.

Hardly knowing what she did, she stepped into the little room where she always arranged the flowers, set her basket on the table, sat down beside it and stared before her with eyes that saw nothing. She was looking into a future without Ethan. She had made a false step and it could never be recalled. For ever he would shy away from her in case she should offer the sympathy he could not endure.

"Oh, Hermia Courland, I hate you, I hate you," was what she was mechanically repeating in her mind.

Nora Belton, who, lying wakeful, had known to a moment the time at which Guy returned to Romaldscar the previous night, or rather, that morning, was not feeling much happier.

Dinsmore had been monosyllabic during breakfast and had gone out alone directly after.

She began to feel that she had had enough of the moors. In fact, they were never much to her taste. She usually went to somebody's shooting, just in order to say that she had been; but it soon palled; and she determined to be off the following day and betake herself to the Italian Lakes.

"That ought to bring the silly boy round," she muttered furiously. "If he really lets that little devil entangle him he's a bigger fool than I give him credit for being."

CHAPTER XIII

IN A HOUSE BY THE SEA

A COLD, persistent drizzle had driven the guests at the Falaise Hotel at Dieppe to sit in the winter garden.

There the atmosphere was a mixture of cigarette smoke, spirits and hot-house flowers; a sickly combination.

Hermia sat at a bridge table, killing time, in the company of three people who were all better players and all much keener keepers of their scores than she was.

Her partner was one Major Cooper, whose wife was playing against him; an arrangement which made it matter but little to the couple which side won.

Nothing but blankest boredom would have induced Hermia to play with such people—snobs who fawned upon her title and practically ostracised poor old Uncle Joe, so that when the weather was bad he was driven to pass the time in his bedroom to escape their rudeness.

Mrs. Cooper pushed aside her chair. "Rubber," said she in business-like tones. "Better stop now, hadn't we? The lunch bell will sound directly."

Hermia said neither yes nor no. She leaned back in her chair and watched Mr. Cooper add and sub-

tract. He looked at Mr. Hunter, his wife's partner.

"I make it fifteen hundred."

"H'm—ah—yes, so do I. Lady Courland, you're out of luck to-day."

"Haven't held a hand," said Hermia listlessly. "The best players can't stand up against such luck."

"You ought to be lucky in love," smiled Mrs. Cooper, collecting the cards and shuffling them mechanically.

"That's one pound seventeen and six, please, Lady Courland," went on Mr. Cooper, taking out his own note-case. Hermia shrugged her shoulders. She lost steadily, day by day, and she was beginning to think that it was not good enough.

"Coming to the races this afternoon?" asked Hunter as he took the money from her. "Got a bit on, haven't you?"

"No. My uncle thought the horses a rotten lot," said the girl, stifling a yawn. "He's used to our English racing—Martershire breeds Derby winners, you know. Our point-to-point racing would make these horses look silly."

"I believe you. But you must do something this afternoon. Come along, the weather's going to clear, I'm told."

"I'll see. I won't promise," she replied, rising and going out of the room with a wish that she might never see any of them again as long as she lived.

Wandering into her bedroom she stood at the window, gazing out over the leaden sea which had looked

so gay and dancing and blue when they arrived a fortnight ago.

A fortnight? It seemed to her like seven years.

Where was Guy Dinsmore? That was the question that was torturing her.

On the morning after the moonlight drive, she and he had met by appointment, secretly, in the woods near Lancemoor and he had taken his leave, saying that he was going at once to town to ascertain whether a billet which had been half promised him was still available. She had told him their own plans—Dieppe for a time “to give Uncle Joe some sea air”—then Hardelot for her—after that, what the fates should decree, the securing of his job being the determining factor.

Since then—not a word.

Upon arrival she had written to his club, giving him the name of their hotel. She was much too proud to write again. The Glendavids, she knew, could give no information, since they were leaving that very week for Venice, where they would spend a couple of months until they went on to Egypt for the winter. She knew that the Belton party had left Romaldscar; and Lady Glen, in a somewhat stiff letter written a week ago, had told her that the guests now visiting there were a care-worn parson and his wife who otherwise could have had no holiday, and one of the Balderston masters, with his wife and two children—in like case.

“And that’s the man they wanted me to marry—*me!*” Hermia had muttered, making a grimace when she read the news. “He’s like one of the men in a

novel by Charlotte Yonge! . . . A pity, rather, for there's something about him that is interesting, if he would let it come out."

What a joyful thing life had seemed on that fine summer day when they had descended the gorge to Great Boon Ghyll! She had been secure in the devotion of Storm—she had just discovered that Guy was coming to Romaldscar. That weird Marnie—and her son—that prophecy of trouble—in *a house by the sea*.

She caught back her thoughts in a sudden panic and turned from the window shuddering.

The bell for *déjeuner* had some minutes ago pealed through the big hotel. She must go and face the poor old man whose fading eyes every day looked the question he dared not put. Every day it grew harder for her to carry a bold front. As she wandered into Uncle Joe's room to fetch him down to lunch she wondered vaguely what would become of her if Guy were to fail her.

But he would not. He could not. All their delight was in each other. She steadfastly rejected the contemplation of a future without him.

She opened the door of the old man's bedroom, and jumped as if she had been shot. Mr. Pippin's body was hanging over the arm of a low easy chair in such a way that his head touched the ground. He was not unconscious; at least, his limbs were moving; twitching feebly, as if in a futile attempt to change his posture.

Hermia flew to him with a cry. "Uncle Joe! Oh, Uncle Joe, what is it? What's the matter with you?"

she cried incoherently as she strove to lift his head from that ghastly inversion. Somehow, after a struggle, she did succeed in pushing him into something resembling a sitting posture; and then she uttered a little cry of terror, for the countenance that glared at her, lolling against the back of the chair, was like a nightmare. The whole of one side of the features was dragging downward, the arm on that side being rigid also. He tried to speak. The effort was frightful; but he achieved nothing.

She flew to the door in panic and screamed for Meakins. The lady's maid was just descending the stairs to have her lunch and followed the distracted girl into the room with her usual air of disdaining the little publican.

"Mercy!" she gasped, when faced by the apparition in the chair.

"Oh, Meakins, what's the matter? What's the matter with him? Tell me!"

"A stroke, melady. That's it, if you ask me. Better send for the doctor at once—and don't you be too frightened—they often get all right after a stroke. It'll very likely pass off, but you must have a doctor at once. Should I go and ask the man to telephone for the best in the place, melady? There's sure to be an English doctor in Dieppe, and anyway, the porter understands English."

She hurried away and Hermia, utterly at a loss as to what to do, bent above the stricken man in an agony, kissing his forehead and telling him that she had sent for a doctor.

"Can you hear me? Blink twice if you under-

stand." He did so, and in her relief she shed a few tears.

"All right, dear, so long as you know what I'm saying," she told him tenderly. "I was so frightened—you don't look like yourself. But you'll come round—Meakins says so—and be all right again in a few days."

Her arms went around him, she laid her little head upon his breast, so as to hide from herself the terror of his aspect. This was Lady Courland at her best—the selfish little worldling had a sincere affection for the old Pippin uncle.

In a very few minutes there entered the hall porter of the hotel and a buxom female who was the manageress. They soon had the invalid laid upon the bed and then, with the help of Meakins, grudgingly but efficiently given, they proceeded to undress him.

An English doctor arrived before they had finished and he gave prompt orders which sent everyone in different directions and included the immediate summoning of a nurse.

When the necessary measures had been taken, Hermia asked the doctor what he thought. He answered kindly that it was better to prepare her for the worst. Mr. Pippin's heart was so weak that there was practically no chance of recovery.

"Has he not been under a doctor in England?" he asked in surprise. "His heart must have been giving him trouble for years."

Hermia shook her head. She could hardly speak for tears. "He never said anything to me about it," she gasped.

"I should write to his nearest relations and tell them to come at once if they wish to see him," was the doctor's advice.

"He hasn't any. I haven't any. We're alone in the world."

"Well, better ask some friend to come and be with you," suggested the doctor. "You are very young to have the weight of this upon your shoulders. Would you not rather he were moved to a nursing home? The hotel people are anxious for that—they don't like illness here——"

Upon this, Hermia burst into entreaty, begging the doctor to exert his influence to have the sick man left where he was.

"They do recover from a stroke—Meakins says so," she reiterated, like a child appealing for comfort. So urgent was her desire not to have her uncle taken away that the doctor promised to do what he could to have things left as they were—at least for another four-and-twenty hours.

Hermia's title and Hermia's beauty were probably the determining factors with the management, and after two or three hours of agitation and suspense she was told that a nurse would shortly arrive and that Mr. Pippin could retain his room at least until the following day, when, if he showed no signs of recovery, he must be taken away.

She hardly knew how the rest of the day passed. Meakins brought her some food at intervals and she ate it mechanically. At first she was wholly absorbed in a desperate effort to make out something which her uncle apparently wanted to tell her. His beseeching

eyes, like boiled gooseberries, goggling from his distorted face, were his only means of communication with the world. They roamed always to the side of the room where, on a table, stood a small dispatch box, locked.

After many fruitless attempts to ascertain his meaning, Hermia got his keys and opened it. It was full of dunning letters, but there was a wallet packed with English money and she showed him that she had found it, carefully re-locking the box after she had examined its contents.

She was troubled to find that he still kept twisting his eyes in that direction with an effort that grew more and more painful; and as there was nothing else on the table but a library book, two or three newspapers, one or two medicine bottles and the remains of her lunch, she finally took up the book, opened it where his marker stood and began to read aloud to him. Either this was what he wanted or he had abandoned his attempt to enlighten her. His eyes ceased to signal and gradually closed. He was asleep when the nurse arrived—or so she thought.

Thus relieved, Hermia determined to send a telegram to Guy. She was in complete agreement with the doctor that the weight of this illness and anxiety was too great for her to support alone. When Guy heard that she was alone in France with her one protector a helpless log, he must come to the rescue; and there was nobody else.

Lady Glendavid was her only intimate friend and she was so vexed with Hermia that for the moment she had as it were washed her hands of her. Besides,

she was already in Venice or on her way thither. To appeal to her would be a last desperate measure. The girl decided not to do so until she knew for certain that Guy would not come; and that seemed to her wholly out of the question.

Throughout the next twenty-four hours Joseph Pip-pin lingered, but he was never again conscious. He passed away in the early hours of the following morning.

CHAPTER XIV

FORSAKEN

AT sight and touch of the dead man, panic invaded Hermia's soul.

All her life she had had a man to look after her—to gratify her whims, to spoil her in every direction. This man who lay there resting so calmly, with features restored to their normal expression and invested with the new and sudden dignity which death sometimes brings, had sacrificed everything for his sister's child. For her he had left the trade that suited him, had endured the martyrdom of hotel life, had embarked upon the wildness of a season in town, knowing no more than a savage might of what was expected of him.

He had shorn himself of everything that represented comfort to him—his shabby arm-chair, his foul pipe, his slippered feet upon an old hearthrug—in order that "‘Ernie" might have what he considered the due position and luxury of a peeress in her own right.

Hermia had lived like the lilies of the field, complaining bitterly of poverty, but nevertheless usually getting what she wanted and never asking whence it came. She knew as a fact that they were "on the rocks"—that the greater part of the sum for which

she had sold the Hoppner had melted in a few minutes when Uncle Joe had drawn such cheques as were absolutely necessary to keep him out of the county courts.

How far the balance would go towards paying their expenses at the Falaise, the doctor's bill, the nurse's bill, the sum demanded by a resentful manageress for the fact that the patient had been allowed to inconvenience her by dying in the hotel and the expenses of the funeral, her ladyship had simply no idea at all.

She had to submit, though with a passion of protest, to seeing the corpse carried away to the mortuary within an hour of the last breath having been drawn.

Her wishes had not been consulted, the body had been hurriedly conveyed through the silent corridors before dawn, that there might be no risk of visitors encountering anything of the kind. Uncle Joe's possessions were all packed, his bags strapped and taken to the luggage-room and by nine o'clock in the morning the carpet was up in his room and paper-hangers and whitewashers were at work—for which renovations she was informed that she would have to pay . . . and Guy had not replied to her pitiful message!

She did not accuse him of negligence. She knew that for some reason or other he had not received her telegram.

Since Uncle Joe was dead, Guy was her only kinsman. His place at this crisis was at her side, whether he was or was not her lover. She felt it imperative that he should be found—that in some way he must

be informed of her need of him. But how? She did not know if Miss Lowrie were still at Romaldscar or not; and in any case, Guy had stayed there as Nora Belton's friend, not Miss Lowrie's nor the Storms'. Hermia had no notion where Mrs. Belton was now to be sought, nor even of a permanent address that would find her, since she had been occupying a furnished house in town which she had now given up. Hermia considered the writing of a letter to Storm himself. Somehow she felt certain that if he knew where Guy was he would forward an enclosure if she asked him to do so.

In haste, lest she later regret her impulse, she wrote a few impassioned lines to Dinsmore and enclosed the envelope in one to Storm, with a few lines which ran as follows:

"I know that you will be grieved to hear that I have lost my dear friend and uncle, Mr. Pippin. He had a stroke and died quite suddenly this morning. I have telegraphed to my only relation, Mr. Dinsmore, but as I have had no reply, I know the message cannot have reached him. I am writing to you on the chance that you may know where to find him. If so, may I ask from you the kindness of forwarding the enclosed at once?"

Having sent this letter to post—the porter assuring her that it would catch the morning boat and be in London that night—she was free to listen to Meakins's urgent representations that she must go and buy mourning.

"You haven't got a rag of black, except one eve-

ning gown and you can't go to a funeral in that," she said.

"Oh, Meakins, I don't know what to do! I don't believe I have any money to pay for clothes! I had better give you a month's notice and I believe I owe you at least six months' wages, don't I?"

"You do, melady," replied Meakins grimly, "but I expect when your uncle's will's proved there'll be enough to pay such-like things. Anyway, we won't talk of it just now. Black you must have, if you don't want the whole hotel talking. And I've told the head waiter, who's as English as I am, that if I bring your meals upstairs there is no need to charge extra for them on the bill. They say the funeral can't be till Friday—this is Tuesday—and you don't want to use the public rooms between this and then, do you? So let me put on your grey suit and I'll call a taxi and take you to the big shop. It's fortunate you can shop in French, melady, isn't it?"

"We don't want a taxi, we can go on our feet."

"And have the whole place staring at your red eyelids, melady?"

"No, Meakins, perhaps you're right. Let us keep up appearances as long as we can."

"There's that Mr. Freeth, your lawyer—he ought to be able to raise you some money," suggested Meakins as she dressed her. "Look at you with a great palace like Courland Meynell and not the money for a taxi fare!"

"Mr. Freeth is furious with me because I've sold the gem of the family pictures. His last letter was positively ferocious," sighed Hermia; but she spoke

absent-mindedly, for she was beginning to regret the impulse which had driven her to write to Storm. It had dawned upon her that Guy's omitting to telegraph did not necessarily imply that he was omitting to come. It would be just like him to post off without thinking of announcing his arrival. If he was out of London, as was almost certain, the telegram would have to follow him. When he got it he would perhaps pack in desperate haste to catch a train. This very next boat might bring him—and then how foolish she would feel! She might have waited a few hours!

The hope so buoyed her up that her spirits rose. She chose some garments which did not require much alteration and returned to the hotel in a more normal frame of mind.

But when night closed and brought no help she went to bed utterly dejected. She was young and in love and the following day brought renewed expectation, only to fade into yet more miserable disappointment.

The ensuing forty-eight hours were in themselves such a discipline as the spoilt girl had never foreboded.

As the hours crept on and her isolation and sense of being abandoned intensified, her mind dwelt more and more persistently upon Marnie Pickersgill and her prophecy.

"Death and sorrow, in a house by the sea!"

There would be still a week after the funeral before she was due at Prue Merridew's bungalow. The idea of dragging out the days alone in this hotel was

horrible; yet she knew not where else to go. On Thursday night, the eve of the funeral, she strung herself up to the point of writing to Lady Merridew to ask if she could be received a few days earlier. Then she reflected that if they had, as her cousin informed her, quite a gay little party at Hardelet, they might not wish to add to it a sorrowful girl in deep mourning. She would be the skeleton at their feast. They would be more likely to ask her to postpone her visit than to hasten it. She tore up the letter and blankly wondered what on earth would become of her.

She was not as a rule weak, nor slow to make a decision, but Guy's defection seemed to have broken some spring in her and left her defenceless, unable to fight trouble.

The firm which was arranging for her uncle's burial were also carrying out a very important funeral that day, a member of the municipality of Dieppe, who was to be taken to a village church some miles away. Thus they had arranged not to bury Uncle Joe until the afternoon.

Hermia and Meakins had paid two visits to the mortuary and deposited flowers upon the coffin. There was absolutely nothing that Hermia could do all that long morning but fret herself to the point of despair.

There was not one soul in the whole of that vast hotel with whom she felt herself to be in sympathy. To all appearance they belonged to her world—they, like herself, were hard and pleasure-loving, well-dressed and shallow. They hated duty and they

hated sorrow; and they avoided poverty like the plague, shying away instinctively from anyone whom they believed to be infected by it.

It was, therefore, perhaps to Mrs. Cooper's credit that she should have come at once to Hermia's door upon hearing the news of her uncle's death.

Hermia, however, had no use for Mrs. Cooper at the best of times; and at this black moment she felt a positive loathing for her. She firmly refused to see her, though Meakins tried to persuade her; and the lady, once rebuffed, made no further attempt.

When, about an hour before *déjeuner*, a lift boy knocked at her door and said: "A gentleman wishes to see Madame la Comtesse," for a moment she wondered whether Hunter had had the impudence . . . then suddenly hope leaped to life and for a moment everything reeled about her. As in a dream she heard the boy's high pipe: "*Un Monsieur Anglais, qui vient d'arriver . . .*"

She got to her feet—"Show him up—at once!"

The boy vanished and her excitement burst from her in a sob of rapturous relief. He had come—he had come in time for the funeral! It was all right! As she had always known—as she had assured Uncle Joe that day at Lancemoor—it was *all right!*

. . . She might have trusted him. How hateful she had been! During these black days she had gone down to the very shades. Her courage, her faith had failed her.

She made a huge effort to control herself, for the shock through which she was passing had unstrung her.

To the man who entered, the slender, golden-haired and pale girl in dead black was a thousand times more desirable than he had found her in the subtle and sophisticated frocks in which he had hitherto seen her. Through his mind rushed the immortal line:

“A deep distress hath humanised my soul.”

For a brief moment he saw her transfigured face of welcome—her hands outstretched, her lips parted, two tears lying just below her glorious eyes—then all changed, faded.

The colour forsook her cheeks, she tottered, grasped the back of a chair, closed her eyes—opened them again as if to make sure of the truth of her disillusion; then bowed her head as if the bludgeoning of fate were too much for her at last.

For the man who stood in the doorway, his fervent eyes fixed upon her, was not Guy Dinsmore, but Ethan Storm.

CHAPTER XV

PERSEUS AND ANDROMEDA

WHATEVER feelings surged in Ethan's heart at that critical moment, his manner showed no variation from its usual self-contained stiffness.

"I am hoping you won't consider this an intrusion," he said quietly. "I thought it most kind of you to apprise me of Mr. Pippin's death, and in the circumstances I hoped you might allow me to show my respect for him by attending his funeral if I could get here in time. They tell me downstairs that I *am* in time."

This Victorian speech gave her the requisite moment to pull herself together. His direct manner and conventional words seemed to make it the most probable thing in the world that he should travel from Mickleshire to France at a minute's notice to attend the obsequies of one with whom he was barely acquainted. She was able to reply in the same strain:

"This is very kind of you, Mr. Storm."

He grasped at her hand with a momentary lack of self-command, but relinquished it after a scarcely perceptible hesitation. It was so cold—he longed to cherish it. But he had not come there to give way to his feelings; and they were so insurgent that he foresaw how impossible it would be to hide them if she

were to break down. He completed the formal exchange of civilities with "On the contrary, I have to thank you for allowing me to pay my last respects."

Somehow she found herself seated, with him at her side; and was conscious of a feeling of relief, as though some intolerable weight were lifted from her shoulders simply by the sight of him.

"It was quite sudden, I gather?" he asked gently. "Don't answer if you feel you can't talk about it."

"On the contrary, I believe I shall be glad—oh, it has been awful—these days alone—shut up here—with not a soul . . ."

"I thought it might be so. As your cousin is evidently abroad, it occurred to me that you might be able to make some use of me. I mean, there are often things which a woman in grief is glad to have settled for her." He took out his watch. "The funeral is not until half-past two. Is there anything you would like me to do before that?"

She cleared her throat. "Please tell me first—did you forward my letter to my cousin?"

"I did not know where to address it. As you had telegraphed in vain, both to his club and his chambers, it seemed that letters were not being sent on to him. I took yours, therefore, to London myself and went to Jermyn Street. There I saw his man and learned, of course, the reason for his silence."

His tone was hesitating, gentle, that of one who knows he touches a wound.

She started, raised her eyes to his with a terrible question. "The reason? Is he ill—has anything happened to him? Oh——" She sprang to her feet,

appealing to him piteously. "Tell me, he isn't dead, too, is he? Isn't one death enough—'death and sorrow in the house that looks out upon the sea'?"

His face changed. "Did Marnie say that? But no, as far as I am aware he is perfectly well."

"Then what—then what?"

"You have not seen it? It was in the papers on Monday last——"

"*Monday?*" She heard this with a shock. It was the day of Uncle Joe's seizure. Was bad news its cause? And those appealing looks he kept turning to the table in his room—was it the *newspaper* to which he wanted to draw her attention in his last brief hour of consciousness? . . .

She turned from Storm without replying and went to a shelf whereon she had laid the papers which were on Mr. Pippin's table that fatal day. He had handled them. She had a reluctance to throw them away.

Ethan, thankful to be spared the necessity to deal the blow himself, waited while she fumbled a little. She then brought the papers to him. One of them was a well-known organ of society gossip. He turned the pages till he came to the announcement column.

And her doom stared her in the face.

"An engagement which will give much pleasure to a wide circle of friends is that between Mr. Guy Dinsmore, sole surviving male representative of the late Earl of Courland, and Mrs. Ephraim Belton, widow of the late Ephraim Z. Belton, of Chicago, whose bridge teas and small dances were such a feature this summer in town," etc.

Hermia stood motionless. "You—you have seen this?" she asked at last in a voice he hardly recognised.

"No. I am a poor reader of newspapers. Dinsmore's man showed it to me yesterday in the *Morning Post*."

There was a further pause, which he felt it impossible for him to break. At last—"Do you know where they are?" she almost whispered.

"Only that Mrs. Belton, when she left us, intended to go to the Italian Lakes. I have some idea that it was to be Lake Garda, or one of the less-known centres."

"Well—that gives a reason why he could not come to me," said Hermia slowly. Each word seemed to be the result of a force put upon herself; and she spoke with her back to Ethan. "His servant had forwarded my wire?" she presently achieved.

"No. He had no address. He could not forward anything until an address was given. I could think of nothing to do. I left your letter and impressed upon him that it and the telegram were both important and should be sent on the first opportunity."

Silence. She neither moved nor spoke and again, as on his first entry, Ethan was conscious that the moment was critical and that he had to take it upon his own shoulders for good or ill.

"It is very natural that in your distress and pre-occupation you should not have read the papers," he said in matter-of-course tones. "But you will now see that your cousin will not be at liberty just at present to go into your affairs or to settle up the small matters

of business which ought to be dealt with at once. I wonder if you would let me do this for you? I need not tell you that it would be an honour and a privilege and I am quite at your service."

"You are extremely kind."

"You know better than that. You know what I would do if I had my will. As that cannot be, don't prevent me from doing what I can. . . . From what the management here has told me, I gather that they have hesitated to bother you with business while you are so unhappy, but that there are formalities to be complied with, papers for your signature and so on, which they are anxious to put through without delay. If you will let me arrange things with them I can go round, after the funeral, to the Mairie and put all in order for you."

As she turned at last to him, he knew that he had done the right thing. Her present anxieties for the moment seemed even more important than her treacherous lover.

She was too thankful for Storm's help to care whether or no she had any right to accept it.

To his relief, she brought her uncle's dispatch-case to him and confessed frankly that she had no idea whether she could meet her expenses or where she could go if she left the hotel.

The ice once broken, she spoke freely and showed him the money she had in the wallet. She even confessed to owing Meakins quite a large sum for arrears in wages.

To her relief he seemed to think the sum in hand would recover everything; he made light of her

liabilities—assured her that she would have no difficulties—gathered up the papers, took possession of them and of the box which contained them, and disappeared, leaving her free to grapple with the blow which had been dealt her.

In about half an hour an obsequious waiter arrived with a cloth and proceeded to lay the table with *déjeuner* for two. When it was ready Storm reappeared, took his seat as though their companionship were the most natural thing in the world and, without any allusion to present circumstances, gave her details of a slight gun accident which had befallen Sir Tom, and one or two other items of Romaldscar news.

She listened with a composure which struck him as admirable. There were no signs of tears upon the proud little face; and, although she was rather silent, her voice when she did speak was firm and controlled.

She was able to walk downstairs with him when the undertaker's carriage was announced, and she went through the trying details of the ensuing ceremony without breaking down.

He put her back into the carriage at the cemetery gate with Meakins, who was snivelling behind her veil in a way which gave him a friendly feeling towards the woman.

"I am off now," he said, "to the Mairie and one or two other places. It is for you to say whether you would rather be left alone this evening or whether you would allow me to dine with you. I shall do exactly as you wish in the matter."

Hermia leaned forward, looking at him wistfully.

"You are not going away to-night?" He could have sworn that her voice was eager.

"Not unless you wish it."

"There are things which I ought to settle," she faltered. "If you don't mind my being depressing company—do come and dine and let me talk to you——"

"You know I would rather be with you than anywhere else on earth," he answered quietly. "Shall we say eight o'clock—and I hope then to be able to explain to you your position with regard to Mr. Pippin's affairs and so on. If I might offer you advice, it is that you and Meakins do not go indoors yet, but drive round for an hour or so—you look as if you want fresh air."

He walked off with his heart in his throat. Never before had he seen her wistful. He had never even pictured her as being so. It seemed to him horribly pathetic.

He went off to complete formalities, then back to the hotel to search the dead man's pass-book and the small collection of vouchers which he had found in the box. He had cabled before *déjeuner* to Mr. Pippin's bank and the answer reached him about five o'clock.

Quite simply, there were no assets. The Dominoes Inn was not Uncle Joe's property, but leasehold. So far as could be ascertained, his life was not insured, except for the sum of fifty pounds with a burial insurance company—a provision seldom omitted by those of his class.

Hermia had nothing in the wide world except Courland Meynell—unlet at present and likely so to

continue unless extensive repairs were executed.

He asked himself what he could do. Eleanor Lowrie was paying autumn visits, and Mollie and her husband had been forced to return to their home at the beginning of term. Lady Glendavid, the one person he knew intimately enough to ask her to come and play propriety, had established herself at Venice at her favourite hotel, and did not intend to return to England until the following spring.

It was not feasible, even in these days of unchaperoned laxity, for Storm to invite the Countess to his bachelor establishment at Romaldscar.

Seated at tea in the lounge, he studied critically the guests who came and went; and decided that it would not do at all to leave the lonely girl in such a milieu. They did not know of Hermia's abject poverty and they did not know her title and her romantic history. Hermia was self-willed and impulsive—she was also miserable just now, which might make her reckless.

His arrival had soon been bruited through the hotel and it was not long before the Countess's late bridge partners accosted him and tried to worm information out of him.

They spoke—lightly enough, but with meaning—of I O U's which they held and asked when the Countess was leaving. It was exasperating to be unable to claim any relationship, but he unblushingly described himself as "a very old friend," and explained the lady's singular lack of family ties and the difficult situation created by its being the time of year when nobody was within reach.

He also asked for their I O U's, informing them that he was authorised to be her ladyship's paymaster.

The sight of bank-notes caused an instant increase of cordiality, slightly dashed by the production of a book of receipt-forms which Storm gravely filled in and presented for signature.

"He's her lawyer, I suppose," he heard one say to another as he walked off. He did not hear the criticism which ensued, in which he was described as a pretty dry stick; nor the free discussion into which they afterwards launched respecting the young Countess and her remarkable isolation.

"Screw loose—badly loose—somewhere," was Captain Hunter's opinion. "Girl like that left without any friend of her own set. Always a sound reason for that kind of thing if you only knew it."

CHAPTER XVI

SURRENDER

CONSIDERABLE embarrassment lurked beneath Ethan's conventional dinner-jacket that night. He was doubtful of his own powers as a liar. He knew Hermia's wit to be quick and keen as a razor blade, and he was most unpractised in the art of deception.

There were points in his favour, however, chief of which was his own character for strict veracity. Nobody who knew him would suspect him of fraud. Mollie used to say that it was anguish of spirit for Ethan to write "Dear Mr. Jones" to a person whom he disliked. He was the kind of man who would interrupt your best story to correct you, if you said something happened at a quarter past six, which actually took place at twelve minutes past; however irrelevant such correction might be.

One other advantage was his capacity for controlling face and voice. He seldom laughed, and his habitual, rather wooden, gravity might lead you to suppose him dull, but never to believe him false.

Nevertheless, his heart was beating far more quickly than he liked when the Countess and he came to the end of a dainty little dinner which he had ordered with the particular design of tempting her ap-

petite. He was but a poor hand at the composition of a menu, as in all things pertaining to luxury; but he had the sense to call Meakins into consultation, and she proved quite equal to the occasion. Hermia, though she ate little, was obviously appreciative. She was pale, and the purple marks under her eyes told tales; but she was quite mistress of herself and there was nothing to indicate that her perceptive powers were not in first-rate working order.

They talked of trivialities over their coffee and cigarettes, while the waiter removed the dishes; but when they were left together, in the glow of a wood-fire which the chill of autumn rendered pleasant, Storm rose, fetched a little table to his side, and laid upon it a bundle of documents.

"I must ask your leave to be dull—that is to say, duller than usual—for about ten minutes. It oughtn't to take much more."

To this she replied with a polite murmur, and he handed her a small sheaf of receipted bills, neatly held together with an elastic band.

"Had you counted the money in your uncle's wallet carefully?" he asked, with a quite convincing show of indifference. If she had, he was done; but he soon saw that she had not. She raised the white, young shoulders that gleamed under the transparency of her black frock; and shook her head.

"I counted it at once, as soon as I got possession of it," he went on, his voice gaining confidence as he decided that he might lie with impunity. "Here is a memorandum of the amount I found, and also of the aggregate of your liabilities. It leaves, you see,

a balance of twenty pounds, which I herewith hand over to you. If you wish it changed into French currency, I can easily do so for you. The charges for burial and so on are all there, and hotel expenses up to date. Upon finding your uncle's cheque book, I wired to his bank; and the result of my inquiries I now wish to lay before you."

She gave a laugh that was half a gasp. "The result was—nothing!" said she. "I don't need telling that. I could have saved you the trouble of telegraphing. I knew he had an overdraft."

"That is true—or was true; but it is not the case now that he is dead. I expect you know, do you not, what an insurance policy is—a life insurance?"

"I think I do. It is money that will be paid to the survivor on the death of the insured person."

"Quite. Mr. Pippin had insured his life for a thousand pounds. It appears that lately he had been in considerable financial straits, and he deposited his policy with his bank in order to be in a position to negotiate an overdraft. But quite recently he was able to repay the amount which he owed the bank——"

To his enormous relief, this wild statement was accepted. Hermia nodded, without surprise. "When I sold the picture," said she.

"Quite so—when you sold the picture," he eagerly chimed in. "As a result the insurance policy is yours; and although the money was naturally not available as long as your uncle lived, it now reverts to you, and a thousand pounds is better than nothing, is it not?"

She sank back in her chair with a long-drawn breath

of thankfulness. "Oh, how clever of you to find out! I never guessed that! I never thought about an insurance! Oh, *thank you*, Mr. Storm, I should have been completely up the pole but for you!"

He smiled, a smile of secret satisfaction, his eyes bent on the tablecloth. "I am glad to be able to reassure you," said he, "and I hope also you will approve of my further action. It will be some time before you could touch that insurance money—there must be proof of death and other formalities. I have therefore taken the liberty of paying into your banking account the sum of one thousand pounds, and I have prepared a little document for your signature, handing over your interest in the insurance policy to me. You see that I am doing you no favour—the advantage of the transaction to you is that you will have the immediate use of the money. To me, it matters very little whether I have it now or next year. I am simply paying you one thousand pounds for a policy which is worth the same sum. No obligation on either side. I hope you approve?"

There was a pause while Hermia, half incredulous, sat digesting these curiously comforting tidings. "You mean that I actually have, at this moment, a sum of one thousand pounds in the bank?"

"Yes, that is what I mean. I telegraphed the money and told them to open an account for you, as I see that hitherto your money—the rent of Courland Meynell—has passed through your uncle's account. I have promised to send them a specimen signature of yours at once, so that your cheque would be honoured in a

few days' time; and meanwhile you have that twenty pounds to go on with."

Another silence. At last:

"I don't know what to say. I am really so grateful that it *hurts*—but I can't find words to express it. I'm a silly little rotter, but I do appreciate your friendship. After my turning you down and all!"

"Would you like to pay me in full?" he suddenly asked.

She turned a very apprehensive face to him. "I—I might not be able to afford that . . ."

He smiled, looking her steadily in the eyes. "Don't be afraid—I'm not such a fool as I seem. All I ask is the privilege of being allowed to preach to you for a minute or two."

For a moment the vanished mischief rose in her eyes and mocked at him. "*Que Monsieur l'assassin, commence,*" said she demurely.

"It's just this," he began in his measured way. "Twice since I have known you I have found you to be a gambler; once down by Great Boon Ghyll, and since that, here; and I want to ask you if you won't give me your word not to play bridge with those people downstairs. You are no match for them; and you have no money to spend on gambling debts. You simply can't afford to lose."

She gave an impatient shrug. "I know I can't. But what am I to do? All the long, empty days—Oh, Thunderstorm, you simply can't *fancy* what it has been like, here all this time by myself!"

It was a cry from the heart. The corners of his

mouth twitched at her use of his nickname, but his eyes glistened suspiciously.

"Would it be impertinent of me to ask what you intend to do next? I was surprised when you wrote from this address, I understood that you were elsewhere—Deauville, was it? No—Hardelot—with relations."

"I said so," she replied, with an air almost of sullenness. "I wanted to brave it out with Lady Glen." She flashed up at him a glance of resentment, half real, half pretended. "*You* drove me away from Lancemoor, by insisting upon having things out with me. I couldn't stay there after that, they were so angry with me; so I said we were going to Hardelot, where I really have an invitation for next month—and now—now——" her voice tailed off with a suspicious break.

He stared at the fire broodingly. "I am sorry—forgive me, I had no idea I was pushing you into a corner," he said at last. "The thought that I drove you away from Lady Glen's had not occurred to me, and it is not pleasant. But after what has happened, I must own that I don't like the idea of your staying on in this hotel solitary. Can you not write to your friends at Hardelot and say you will come at once?"

"You don't know Prue Merridew. They're a go-ahead lot. The last thing they will want is a woe-begone girl in black. I am more likely to write and say that I won't come at all than that I will come at once. They're worldlings; and for once in my life, I'm quite off worldlings."

The desolation that crept into her voice tugged at

the man's emotions. "I suppose," he ventured, "that you have made no plans as yet? Forgive me if it is brutal to ask—but I feel anxious to know what you intend to do—where to be? Because you will have to make up your mind, won't you?"

She answered: "I have been here in this hotel alone for about ten years, and I can't stay any longer. I have read that sometimes a day may seem like a year and ten years as one day. That has happened to me. I have waited here—waited—waited like the utter fool I am—for one who never came . . . who will never come now. In that long time I have stared at the future, I have thought and thought until I was numbed; and that is how I feel at this moment. I don't know what will become of me, and I don't much care."

He leaned forward and spoke steadily, whatever might be surging under his calm utterance. "That will pass. It must. It is only temporary. You are young and beautiful. Life is before you. In your haste you snatched at the first joy life seemed to offer, and it has failed you. Next time you—you will judge more truly. You have learned something. Take courage."

"Oh, courage! I have no courage! I'm beaten down, I'm defeated! There was a piece of poetry I once had to learn, about 'how there looked her in the face an angel beautiful and bright, and how she knew it was a fiend . . .'—that has happened to me."

Still he remained his side of the fire, still he kept his seat. "In your place I would feel more inclined to say, 'My soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare

of the fowler—the snare is broken and I am delivered.’ ”

She cried out, a fierce little cry, and flung reticence to the winds. “You don’t know—you don’t know! I loved Uncle Joe—people find it hard to believe, but I did. He was good to me; and he was so vexed with me—knew me for a fool, as all of you did—as everyone but myself could see plainly! And I begged him so hard for just these few weeks of delay—he gave me my wish as he gave me anything I asked for—and it has killed him. I tell you that the shock of that news killed him. I know now, he had seen the paper! After his stroke he was trying to tell me something—trying to let me know that I had been made a fool of, a laughing-stock—I who thought myself so irresistible! He knew that all the sacrifices he had made for me had been in vain and that we were finally and utterly done for. In that bitterness he died. How do you suppose I feel about it?”

For a moment she raised her miserable eyes and met his, which glowed with a light like triumph.

“Does it sound brutal to say that I am *glad* you feel as you do?” he asked. “I always knew that you are capable of deep feeling, of right feeling; but it is pleasant to have that conviction confirmed.”

She cried out, “I’m a selfish little beast! I broke his heart! I broke his heart!”

Tears came at last and she turned to the end of the Chesterfield on which she sat, and bowed her face on her arm.

Her closed eyes notwithstanding, she was conscious that he had left his seat, that he was sitting upon

the sofa at her side and begging her not to cry; but these were the first tears she had shed since Uncle Joe's seizure and she fought in vain for control.

He was bending over her—his voice sounded close to her ear; something consoling about it. She almost expected to feel his arms enfold her, but just as his quickened breath and close proximity made this seem inevitable, she knew that he had risen, and heard his step crossing the room.

She thought he was going out, and the idea checked her sobs. Raising her head, she saw him standing the other side of the table, his back to her, as if determined to put temptation behind him. For a moment she stared in wonder at the obstinate hunch of his shoulders; then he spoke, still with his back turned, rather as one resuming the thread of an interrupted conversation.

"You know you said, up in the Queen's room at Romaldscar, that I was too serious for you. You called me 'life-is-real-life-is-earnest'! I felt too completely bowled out to say anything then, but I should just like to explain to you now that, though I myself have a rather rigid—perhaps narrow—sense of duty, I should not expect my wife—er—to limit herself to that. I should not wish her to be my echo. I should, in fact, prefer her to have considerable liberty . . ."

By this time Hermia was feeling too surprised to weep. She sat there staring at Ethan and listening dazed to his remarkable utterance.

"My wife would have her own allowance," he went on, "and I should let her do as she liked, and trust her to keep the vows she made. I felt it is perhaps

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due to me that you should understand this."

After some long seconds of silence in which neither of them moved, Hermia gave a little gasping laugh, a mere expression of nervousness, not mirth. "You tell me this—now—still—when you know all about my folly and—and humiliation?"

Like a flash he turned to face her, the table still between. "What does that mean?" he stammered. "Can you possibly intend me to suppose that, seeing I know—and seeing that I still love you—you might——"

She held her breath, her eyes lowered. He waited a while, tense and eager. "Let me remind you," he presently said, speaking now with more evidence of agitation, "I have already shown you that you are not without means—without resources. You have a thousand pounds—you can put Courland Meynell into such a state of repair as would enable you to let it. You need not look upon me as an alternative to starvation. I am not, God knows, trying to take advantage of your extremity."

Still she contemplated him. "I can't think what makes you want me," she remarked as if musing aloud.

"But I do." Something in the tone gave her an odd sensation of fear. "So much, so *irretrievably*, that I beg of you, Hermia, for pity's sake, not to play with me."

She broke out—"I shall make you miserable!"

"Not if you play the game!—Hermia, give me your word that if we marry, you'll play the game!—But no, don't let me urge you. I daren't—I mustn't—it means too much. Only it would be such an

instant solution of all difficulties. I could cross to-night and get a special licence—you follow with Meakins in a couple of days—in our own country we can be married by special licence without any previous residence. We could be married at Newhaven, or in London, and go to Romaldscar until you have decided what you want to do and where you wish to live——”

He spoke from the urgency of his own longing, with no thought of the fierce temptation he was laying before her. The rebound of the woman scorned!

. . . To be married at once, and to a wealthy man . . . here was revenge, ready to her hand. . . .

She rose to her feet. “Ethan—don’t—don’t stand over there,” she faltered. “Come here, please. I don’t know what to say——”

“And I won’t do a single thing to influence you. I won’t come near you. You must make up your own mind.”

“Five minutes ago I had no idea of such a thing. But if—but as—I mean, as you know about me and still—still——”

“Still love you, still ask to devote my life to you——”

“I’ll live up to my reputation for selfishness and take your devotion, although I may never be able to return it. Now will you please come round the table?”

He came, but slowly, putting strong constraint upon himself.

When he reached her he took her cold little hands in his own, which throbbed with heat. She looked up at him, and the indomitable imp danced in her eyes.

"What price the man who started to lecture me about gambling, and is now encouraging me to make the biggest gamble that life offers?"

He answered, without attempting to kiss or embrace her, just holding and cherishing her hands:

"When you gamble on me, Hermia, you gamble on a certainty!"

CHAPTER XVII

A WEDDING DAY

ETHAN STORM'S newly-made wife stood alone in the window of the Lord Warden Hotel in Dover, gazing out into the street.

The programme which they had finally adopted had not been exactly that so hastily sketched by the eager lover in Dieppe.

Hermia had no mind to go back at once to Romaldscar, where almost every association was painful to her. She begged to be taken abroad, and they decided on the Dolomites for a beginning, with the idea of perhaps joining the Glendavids later in Venice.

She was as eager as Storm for an immediate marriage, and this cannot be arranged in France, where a term of previous residence by both parties is essential for British subjects. It therefore seemed best to return to England, proceed to Dover, be married there by special licence, and travel on thence to the Continent once more.

Ethan went first, to secure the licence, and Lady Courland, now fawned upon and caressed by the entire hotel staff and most of the visitors, crossed with Meakins the following day, and motored from Newhaven to the "Lord Warden," where Storm had engaged rooms for two nights.

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The bridegroom came down from London next morning with his sister, Mollie Verner, in time for the ceremony at midday; and Meakins, after assisting as a witness at the marriage, went to London to procure various things which were needed by her mistress before starting abroad.

The bride's spirits were wretchedly low as she gazed in listless fashion from the window. One cause of her depression lay in the fact that she was feeling far from well. Her recent experiences, the double shock of her uncle's death and Guy's desertion, had struck hard at her naturally healthy constitution; and the excitement of this hasty marriage to a man whom she did not love caused a feverish unrest which took away her appetite and deprived her of sleep.

Storm interested her, but he had also another effect upon her of which she was but dimly conscious, but which was none the less potent. She feared him. His crystal sincerity shamed her, whose easy standards and happy-go-lucky notion of right and wrong had hitherto never been disturbed.

Towards herself he was chivalry incarnate—perhaps too scrupulous, too aloof; but for all that she knew that there were points upon which she could never move him.

Ethan was keenly, cruelly aware that their marriage was, to say the least of it, premature. Hermia was desolate, she had just been mortally wounded by the man she loved. He had caught her on the rebound and he was afraid to imperil his whole future by doing anything to force the pace. He had to woo his wife; and he knew himself to be a poor wooer, al-

though he felt certain that he was born to be an excellent husband.

The wedding itself was not hilarious. By a spiteful chance, Bill Verner, who never suffered an ache nor a pain, contrived to get badly hurt during the first footer match of the term. There was some obscure internal injury and Mollie was ordered to take him up to London to be X-rayed. She came down alone to the wedding and, immediately after lunch, hurried back to her invalid. Storm escorted her to the station, leaving Hermia to rest awhile, since his sister was rather horrified at the pallor of the bride and the purple marks under her eyes.

Hermia, although she put off her black for her marriage, yet felt that she could not wear colours. She was married in a cream-coloured garden-party frock, and did not look her best. Mollie, having ascertained that she had not slept all night administered aspirin, and begged her to try and get a nap. She was distressed at the complete quenching in her new sister-in-law of the insolent gaiety which was her usual wear. To say that she felt doubtful of her brother's future happiness is perhaps to understate her feelings. Ethan installed his wife upon the sofa with books and magazines, and told her that he should not hurry back, as he felt sure she needed to be quiet.

The moment they were out of the room Hermia was on her feet and had wandered to the window. She watched the two figures out of sight, deciding that her husband's appearance was really distinguished; and wishing in a vague, sub-conscious fashion,

that he might be able to compel her to care about him. His tall form had hardly passed from sight when a taxi drew up at the hotel door and someone sprang out, paid the man and entered the hotel. Hermia's heart seemed to her to leave its place—to lift itself bodily and grow too big for her frame.

Guy!!! She had looked down upon the top of his hatted head merely, but she knew. She was positive that it was Guy, and before she could say what impulse moved her, her feet had carried her to the door, and she was out upon the large corridor whence the first-floor rooms open.

The half-thought in her mind at that wild moment was that this was preposterous—that Guy must go—that she and her husband could not possibly remain in the hotel if he were there. . . .

She knew that she had to make sure that it was he, in order, as she told herself, that she might insist upon his leaving before Ethan returned.

She had not long to wait. There was a murmur of voices below and in a minute or two the lift shot up, the fat lift-boy pushed back the grille, and announcing "Number nine, just opposyte, sir," decanted Guy Dinsmore into the passage.

She retreated, but he had seen her, and he sprang across the intervening space. Swiftly he followed her into the private sitting-room, closed the door behind him, rushed upon her, caught her in his arms, held her prisoner and set his lips hard and firm upon her own.

She gave a cry, recoiled with all the strength that was left her, doubled a minute fist and hit him as hard

as she could upon the chest, achieving merely the result of grazing her soft knuckles.

"You scoundrel!" she cried, "I wonder you dare come into my sight! . . . but to have you touch me! . . ."

"Darling, let fly," was his answer, as he released her but followed her across the room. "I deserve most of what you can say, but not quite all. I'm not altogether as bad as you believe, because I've stopped—just in time! I'm here to tell you so! Oh, I'm not going to deny anything. I admit that I'm a rotter. Nora Belton is a damned attractive woman and she fishes with a golden hook. But it's over—I've broken away! A few days ago they sent me on your poor little letter, saying you were all alone and the old man gone. I couldn't stand it, darling, and I came along."

Hermia stood staring at him. Every vestige of colour had gone from her face. Only her eyes, full of indescribable things, seemed alive in her deathly pallor.

"You tell me," she stammered, "you ask me to believe, that your engagement to Nora is broken off?"

He flashed a curious glance at her. "She said to me: 'If you go, you don't come back'; and here I am, you see."

"Yes, here you are," she echoed tonelessly. "What made you come here?"

"I telegraphed the Falaise Hotel from Paris and they said you had left, and they believed you had gone to Dover. I couldn't think why you should do

that, but I had to cross, so I came straight here and asked for you. Right first time!"

She gazed at him in a silence that suddenly checked his tongue. He felt condemned. Somehow her reproach without words conveyed to him something of what he had made her suffer. Her ravaged face smote him. He approached her and almost shyly laid his two hands upon her arms above the elbow, pressing them gently.

"Hermia, say something. Lay your tongue to it! Lash me! I expect it and I know I deserve it. I left you in the lurch and I ought to be shot for it. But I'm here now."

She repeated. "Why have you come?"

"To take you. Whether you forgive me or not. You're mine—my own girl. I've come to fetch you."

The expression that crossed her face startled him.

"You've come too late. *I'm married!*"

She hurled the words at him and she was in no state to remark that his start of surprise was a trifle forced.

"Married! When? How? To whom?"

He made a dive, snatched up her hand and gazed at the band of plain gold upon the otherwise ringless fingers. Thence his eye wandered to the table, still garnished for the bridal lunch. "You are married—you are married," he repeated; and presently—"To Storm, of course. When?"

"To-day." She could hardly speak, her throat seemed closing. "Two hours ago."

He made a sound compounded of rage, scorn and pity. "Two hours married and alone?"

"He will be back . . . before long."

"Then he'll find you gone."

She steadied herself with an effort. Her senses were whirling. "He must find *you* gone, you mean."

He put his arm round her and led her to the sofa, seating himself beside her. "Have we half an hour before he returns? If so, we will indulge in a little quiet conversation. We must talk this out. Hermia—I have to put two considerations before you without delay. The first is that your marriage is at present only a marriage in name; the second, that you entered into it under a complete misapprehension."

She moaned. "He has been so good to me, Guy—so good—when everyone else forsook me——"

"And he's a low hound to take advantage of such a position! Got you into a corner, by Jove! But there are ways out—I'm fairly sure there are! At all events, this is what you have to keep in mind. To-day is just not too late—*but to-morrow will be!*"

"Guy, stop! Guy—Guy—don't you see that I can't?"

"I see that this fool of a man is just simply asking for trouble," cried Guy fiercely. "Oh, but he's not so simple as he looks! What brought him poking his officious nose into your affairs, I should like to know? After you'd turned him down, too!"

"I brought him." Guy's nearness, his old ascendancy over her was asserting itself. In her weakness she could barely speak. "You left me, without a friend, and without hope, without anything at all. I wrote to him to ask him if he knew where you were. You are my only relation, it was your place to come to me, I had to get word to you if I could!"

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"And you didn't foresee that such a letter would bring him hot-foot? Oh, Hermie, what a mess you've made of it! Why couldn't you wait for me?"

"With the announcement of your engagement to another woman screaming at me from every paper? Oh, Guy, you're shameless—you must go—at once—at once!"

"Your saying that—the very fact that you want me to go this moment, shows me what you feel—it admits that it is I whom you would choose if you were free! That being so, you must listen to me, it's only fair. Give me fifteen minutes—hear me out!"

In his arms, lulled by the sound of his voice which had won her heart, she let him talk. The ornate clock on the mantelpiece ticked on. The eager argument, the protestations, the pleading went on also. Plans followed—plans quickly and cleverly made. Hermia sat like a girl hypnotised. Her own will seemed to have left her.

At the end of twenty minutes the struggle was over. He had won. Completely overborne, she sat down at his behest and wrote a few lines to her husband, sealed the note, and left it in a conspicuous position on the table. Guy meanwhile went to the telephone and ordered a car to be at the door in five minutes.

Then, urged by his arm and his voice, she went into her adjoining bedroom, packed a suit-case with necessities, and like an automaton changed her dress and put on hat and coat.

Through the open door of a farther bedroom, she could see Ethan's suit-case lying open on the stand, his overcoat on a chair, a pair of boots beside it. She

recalled the incredible fact that she herself had opened that door, on their return from church, to ask him if he were ready for lunch.

A wonder crept over her—a strange pang—that ever she should have consented to have it so. Clearly she was right to go away—to stop it—to disappear. It was the only thing to do.

Guy looked in upon her. “Ready? That’s right!” he cried in his gay and gallant fashion. “Sit down and wait just five minutes, I must get off a couple of wires, and then we’ll start.”

She let herself drop into an easy-chair which stood by the table in the luxuriously appointed bedroom; and leaned her head back upon its cushiony padding.

Her heart was beating heavily, it seemed to hit her, every time it throbbed. It reminded her of the distant drumming of the Falls at Great Boon Ghyll. Beat—beat—beat! Her mind was a blank as she listened and counted. . . . With a start she pulled herself together and glanced at the watch on her wrist. Forty-five minutes—no, it was fifty, since Ethan had gone out. He had told her that he should be out at least an hour and a half. He would spin out the time, she knew, in order that she might have the rest that he judged her to be in need of; but he would come back the moment his conscience allowed.

She wondered if the Aspirin Mollie had given her was drugging her senses. She felt as though the sleep which had fled from her during these last feverish, restless nights and days, were going to assert its dominion now, just when she most needed to be alert. . . .

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For a minute or two she did actually become unconscious, her exhausted mind drifting away into slumber. Guy's footsteps in the adjoining sitting-room aroused her with a start, and she sprang to her feet. If they were to get away they must be off. They had no time to lose, not a minute.

With a last vague gaze round the room she took up her bag and emerged into the sitting-room, carrying it.

The man who stood beside the table, reading her note, turned slowly round to face her.

It was not Guy. It was Ethan Storm.

CHAPTER XVIII

A BARREN VICTORY

OF all the emotions which fought in the newly-made husband's breast as he turned to face his wife, having just read her note, relief—relief so profound as to be almost gladness—was predominant.

"You have not gone! Thank God!" said he, putting the sheet of paper in his pocket. Then, with a composure which took her aback, "Is Dinsmore here, in the hotel?"

She set down her suit-case, and leaned upon the table, staring at him. "Yes, he is here. Ethan—Ethan—you won't try to stop us, will you? You see that it was all a mistake, don't you? Oh, I know how disgracefully I am treating you, but—but—so few people know—and it's just not—not too late. . . ."

"I'm thankful to remember that on the contrary it is, just too late. That is to say, by God's mercy, I am in a position to be able to save you, whether you wish it or no," said Ethan. He spoke with a complete self-control. The intensity of what he was now feeling had stripped him of his habitual diffidence as one peels off a glove.

Hermia gave a little moaning cry. It was quite unlike her. All her customary assurance had left her,

just as his shyness had left him. For the moment they seemed to have exchanged rôles.

"Ethan, you've read that note—you know what I feel—you won't condemn me to be unhappy all my life long?" she gasped out.

"Quite true. I am determined to prevent it," was the remorseless reply. As he spoke they heard the grille of the lift shoot back, and Hermia darted to the door.

Like lightning, her husband sprang forward, caught her, handling her as though she were a refractory kitten, and pulled her with him to a position behind the door, so that Dinsmore, upon entering, would think the room empty.

He came in almost immediately, making straight for the suit-case which Hermia had put down upon a chair.

Storm gently released his wife, shut the door, and turned to face him.

"You cad!" he said in a low voice. "You incredible cur! What have you to say for yourself?"

Dinsmore was livid. He glanced from husband to wife, meeting the frantic entreaty in her eyes with evident confusion. "I suppose, if you have spoken with Hermia, you know the state of her feeling," said he, moistening his lips with his tongue, "and if you are wise, you will not hinder—her—er—departure."

"My notions of wisdom don't coincide with yours. I shall certainly prevent her departure."

Dinsmore laughed sneeringly. "It would be interesting to know how you *could* prevent it," he remarked.

"Very easily, by punching your head," was the prompt reply, "and that I shall do without hesitation, unless you take yourself off at once."

This totally unexpected fire and defiance enraged Guy so much that prudence deserted him. "So! I did not know I had to deal with a cave-man! Hermia I think you are having a lucky escape," said he smoothly. "This prehistoric tyrant seems to imagine, that he can lock you up on bread and water." He turned venomously on Storm. "You feel that you are crowing on your own dunghill; but if this lady chooses to run away from you, she is free to do so, as you are well aware."

"She cannot do so, because when I have done with you, your condition will be such that she will have nobody to run with," was the instant retort. Storm's manner was still quite quiet, yet one sensed the fury that drove him. "Come, sir, will you leave my room, or shall I throw you out?"

Hermia, who stood clutching the back of a chair, had a blind feeling of being compelled by compassion to come to her lover's rescue. "Ethan—Ethan—what is the use of trying to keep me when I shall only make you miserable?"

He turned to her and his voice lost its edge when he addressed her. "My misery doesn't count, Hermia—it is yours that concerns me——"

"Then let me go, with him—you know—I really—belong to him——"

"Dear, I know it is very possible that, after this, you will not be happy with me—at least not for some time; but it is absolutely certain that you will be

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miserable all your life long if you put yourself into this man's power, and that I must prevent."

He flashed round upon Dinsmore and his voice was once more like corrosive acid. "A honeymoon quarrel, was it? After only a week of matrimony? *Your wife* was inclined to hold the purse-strings too tight, and when you got your cousin's letter, you thought you saw an excellent plan to bring a foolish woman to heel? As soon as she heard that you had eloped with Lady Courland, she would concede anything to get you back. And my wife—*mine*—was to be the pawn in your game!"

Hermia, upon hearing the words "your wife," had made an inarticulate sound, as if she were being choked; but in her desperation she found her voice enough to cry out—"Guy, Guy! It's not true! Say it isn't! you are not *married* to Nora?"

He had winced visibly under Storm's accusation, muttering something about a pack of lies; but at the girl's piteous challenge he completely lost his sense of values, and turned upon her with insolent bravado.

"Well, if it comes to that, you, if I am correctly informed, are also married."

Hermia dropped into a chair, and sat staring before her with features fixed and expressionless. Slowly she turned whiter and whiter.

"And you knew when you came here, that she was married," went on Storm, averting his eyes from sight of that unbearable pain. He strode up to Dinsmore so menacingly that instinctively the young man gave back a pace or two. "Do you deny it? Will you swear that you did *not* know? How did you trace us here?"

You must have been to Dieppe; and, at the Falaise, everybody knew that Lady Courland was to marry me to-day. You thought that you were safe—that you could not be called upon to marry her yourself. You saw your way not only to take your pleasure without paying for it, but to make it serve your own ends as well. Now will you go, or take what I'm tingling to give you? Don't build upon my anxiety to keep my wife's name out of a scandal. If anything of this comes to be known, poor Nora will find she's married a hound who is cut by every decent person. She'd be the one who was in the strong position then, and you'd have defeated your own ends. Clear out, you scum, and be thankful to escape with no bones broken."

Guy trembled with wrath and malice. He was not accustomed to be brow-beaten, and it was gall to him to be thus humiliated before the girl who had so idolised him, and whom he himself preferred to any other woman; moreover he saw the truth of the point just made by Ethan.

"Hermia," he began, "I must appeal to you. I can explain——"

Storm moved very suddenly. To the dazed girl it was like the lightning in that thunderstorm which he was supposed to resemble. His action was so swift that she hardly saw what he did—she only knew that the door stood open, and that Dinsmore shot through the doorway with such force that he fell his length in the passage outside.

Storm followed, closing the door behind him. But for themselves the corridor was quite empty, and Guy

leaped to his feet looking as though ready to fly at his adversary. Storm, his hands in his pockets, laughed contemptuously.

"Better not. If I once begin, I shall give you such a mauling that you might have to go to hospital. Your beauty's your only stock in trade, and for the sake of your connubial bliss, I advise you to take care of it. If I were to spoil it permanently, there's not a jury in England that would give you more than a farthing damages; and, if you're not out of this hotel in five minutes from now, I'll do it."

Dinsmore's expression was not good to see. "Marriage by purchase," he spat out bitterly, "you hypocrite! All the right and all the virtue on your side, and all her love and all her desire on mine! You're a fool! Locks and bolts won't hold a woman! But I leave it to you—the tragedy is that I must leave her to it also!"

"A sneer at *marriage by purchase* comes well indeed from you! Satan rebuking sin! You worm, you make me sick!"

"I'll get back at you somehow! I'll make you sorry for this day's work, you——"

A movement on Storm's part caused the speaker to put himself out of range with more speed than dignity; but as he gained the stairs he used several filthy and insulting epithets.

Storm hardly heard them. He waited motionless till he heard his step ring on the tiles of the hall, and then, after an interval, the starting up of his car.

As that sound gradually diminished in the distance, the victor's face changed. The light of battle died,

and something like despair took possession of his soul.

"What now? What now?" he asked himself hopelessly as he quietly turned the door-handle and re-entered the sitting-room.

Hermia lay on the ground in a little crumpled heap, half-way between her chair and the door. She was quite unconscious.

As he sank on his knees beside her, he received a shock. Just by her mouth something scarlet glistened, and at first he thought of hæmorrhage; then he wondered if it could be a cherry, for it was round and glittering.

Putting out his hand he touched it gingerly. It was the red cornelian heart given her by Marnie Pickersgill as a mascot. Near it lay one end of a slender golden chain, snapped in two.

He slipped the chain into his waistcoat pocket before lifting his wife from the ground and carrying her to her bed.

CHAPTER XIX

CONVALESCENCE

IT was March, and the sloped terraces of the Villa Monceau-Latour were sweet with violets, pink with cyclamen, and starry with pheasant's eye narcissus.

Lady Courland, her arms filled with boat-cushions and novels, came slowly up from the lake-side. Her pace was leisurely, but she moved with the firm step of a healthy woman—or rather of one restored to health.

Under the verandah, with its garlands of mauve bougainvillæa, Lady Glendavid sat at her endless embroidery, and greeted her ironically—"What punctuality! Actually the bell has not rung yet."

Hermia laughed in a perfunctory way as she tipped down the cushions into the hammock and looked at her hands, browned with exposure to the sun and lake.

"I've no excuse to-day," she said, "for Ethan brought me a new watch when he came. I suppose he's not back yet?"

"Oh, no. They said we were not to expect them until tea-time—I mean, not begin to expect them. It's a long walk."

Hermia extended both arms in a luxurious stretch,

yawning daintily as she did so. "Oh! I'm so sleepy! I shall become like the sleeping beauty, with the beauty left out, if I stay in this lotus-eating place much longer. When does our agreement for this villa expire?"

Lady Glen laid down her work and folded it with exactitude, her eyes upon it, as she said, "I am rather glad you have brought up the subject. Ethan asked me to find out what you wanted to do."

Hermia's voice was petulant. "If Ethan wants to know my mind, why can't he ask me?"

"Because he still looks upon you as an invalid who must not be worried with business. But there is the bell. Run along and wash your hands, we will talk as we eat."

Her eyes followed the girl with a puzzled expression as she disappeared; and her brows were knit; but by the time Hermia returned her expression was placid again.

They sat down together in the shady, flower-filled dining-room, and the Swiss manservant handed them a dish of exquisitely cooked fish. For a few minutes Hermia's healthy appetite kept her silent, but after a while she remarked rather defiantly, "I am no longer an invalid. You know I'm not. I've been perfectly well for the last two months."

"No, Hermie, not quite so long as that. You have been convalescent for a long while, but really well only for the last month. Ethan saw a great difference when he came back this last time."

"Well, at least you agree that I'm well now. I have got to take up life again some time; and it seems to me, the sooner the better."

"I am quite of your opinion; but Ethan won't have you hurried."

There was a short, vexed laugh. "He is in no hurry himself, apparently."

"Now, Hermia, if you are going to make game of his angelic patience——"

"You'll know for certain that I'm quite well! Six weeks ago there wasn't a kick in me, but I'm getting vicious now. If they don't take me out for a gallop I shall kick my loose-box to bits."

Lady Glen smiled. "I shouldn't wonder. Well, the question is—what you would like to do in a fortnight's time? Ethan thought you would not want to remain here, but he is willing to take you wherever you want to go. The world is before you."

Hermia said nothing for a while, but at last:

"There are duties before me, too," she said slowly. "As you know, when Ethan was last here we decided he should go and set on foot the renovation of Courland Meynell. He says it is done now as far as the electric lighting and sanitation and so on are concerned. The hot water is installed, and things of that kind—I believe they had a great bother with it, because of the pumping, but they have made a real success of it, he says. That young Benson seems to be very capable. However, there is still a good deal of decorative work to be done, and Ethan wouldn't let them start on that until I had seen it. Don't you think it would be a good plan to go there?"

"Excellent." Lady Glen's tone was dry; but it expressed complete satisfaction.

Hermia leaned elbows on the table and gazed away

over the turquoise waters of the lake, shimmering in the noonday light, and flecked with tiny boats with two sails like folded butterfly wings, the colour of rose petals, drifting on the calm surface.

"I could get ready in a fortnight. I *will* get ready in a fortnight," she murmured. "I have grown such a lotus-eater that I shrink from breaking the spell. When I think of the March wind in England, the dust, the cold, the wet—I just shudder. I hate England, and it will be good for me. I'm going there. Will you tell Ethan that?"

"No. You must tell him yourself. He will be absurdly pleased. I only exist to soften disagreeable blows for him. You can publish your own good tidings. Only make quite sure that you mean it. Don't say you'll go to-day and back out to-morrow. Are you really determined?"

"Yes, I am. It isn't so sudden as it sounds. For a long while I've been asking myself how much longer I was going to moon about here; and when Ethan came back and told me about Courland Meynell, I knew I ought to go. This morning I've screwed my courage to the sticking-point. So that's that."

"I never saw Courland Meynell."

"Dear lady, I've only seen it once, myself. When first the lawyers said it was mine—that grandfather hadn't been able to take it away from me—Uncle Joe thought we ought to go and look at it. It is Somersetshire, and we arranged to stay a couple of nights, as there were one or two servants left in the house as caretakers. Mr. Freeth, Uncle Joe's lawyer, consented to go with us, and then, the morning we were

to start, Uncle Joe had a bad attack and could not travel. Mr. Freeth was busy and it was difficult for him to alter dates, so he and I went down without my uncle."

"Describe it to me—what kind of a place?"

"Oh, it's not, to me, very attractive. They pulled down the old house and built another, some time a hundred years or more ago. When we got there it was October and the grounds had been badly neglected. It all looked damp and gloomy and gave me the hump. There was no car, they sent an old brougham to meet us that looked as if Mrs. Noah had driven off in it when released from the ark. I had hoped to make a little money by selling the horses, carriage and so on; but my fond grandpa had been beforehand with me. He had sold everything saleable and given the money to Guy. Guy was actually there when we arrived. We had not met before. He had come to pack up and remove the things which were willed to him. It was his home, you see, he had been brought up there, and he was very useful, showing me things I didn't know about, and taking me round the estate. We made great friends."

Lady Glen had listened with interest. "How long were you there together?"

"Nearly five days. Mr. Freeth was there all the time to play propriety. I found there was much more to do than I expected. We had the pictures and china valued, and I decided to let the place. Guy would have taken it if he could have afforded it; and I couldn't let him have it for nothing. Some Yankees took it, almost at once; and when they left it I thought

it would be easy to let it again; but it wasn't."

"Shall you let it now? Or live there yourself?"

"Oh, not live there! I hate it!" cried Hermia, passionately.

Lady Glen gazed upon her speculatively. She would have given much to know how matters stood between the husband and wife. At Venice, the preceding autumn, she had received from Hermia the news of her approaching sudden marriage. Having seen the announcement of Guy Dinsmore's engagement, the Glendavids were not surprised; and in view of all the circumstances they were inclined to think the arrangement a good one. Hermia in her letter had spoken quite warmly in praise of Storm's kindness, and had ended:

"Dearest of kind ladies, I know you always thought me a bad egg, but the loss of my old uncle has taught me a lesson, and I mean to try and be good. If Ethan goes on as he has begun, I ought not to find it very difficult."

The next communication of any kind received from the couple was a hurried letter from Storm,—relating how his wife had fallen ill with brain fever on their wedding day, and how she had been but barely snatched from death.

After that, for many weeks, her weakness was so extreme that her life hung in the balance; and Ethan, grateful for sympathy, wrote more to Lady Glen than to his sister or to Eleanor Lowrie, then much occupied with preparations for her marriage to Lord Flaunden.

At last there came a letter containing a very bold

suggestion, namely that the Glendavids should secure a villa on the north shore of Lac Lemman, as the latest specialist called in thought it would be possible to move the patient in an ambulance, and she had expressed a preference for Switzerland rather than the Riviera.

"Well, Elsie," said Sir Tom, when the letter came, "what about it? Cool suggestion—eh? Give up Cairo to look after an invalid all winter?"

But he knew beforehand that it was the thing she would do. She undertook to find a sunny house in a suitable situation, and with the help of all the comforts that money could procure, the sick girl was brought thither a little before Christmas.

The venture was justified. From the very first there was improvement, though for some time this was slow. Lady Glen flung herself heart and soul into the work of coaxing and petting Hermia back to life and health; and after a week Storm felt justified in leaving his wife to her care. He felt that he must go to Romaldscar for Christmas, to see that every member of his household, every tenant on his estate, and in short everyone for whom he might consider himself directly or indirectly responsible, was as happy as it was in his power to render them.

After an interval he returned, but had to leave once more to attend Eleanor's wedding, in fact, to give away the bride. This time his absence was lengthy, for it had been arranged between his wife and himself that he should at once proceed to have Courland Meynell set in order.

Lady Glen studied him, speculated, wondered. Was

all well between him and the spoilt girl upon whom he showered every luxury?

Did the facts, as known to herself, account for the breakdown of the bride upon her wedding day?

Sir Tom maintained that they did. Ethan had told him in some detail, the story of the forlorn little countess, stranded alone and penniless, in the foreign hotel. It was she who had found Joe Pippin dying and distorted; and upon this shock had come the knowledge of Guy's treachery and desertion. Lady Glen granted it; but could not forget that the letter she had received from Hermia, just before her marriage, had not seemed at all despairing; did not, in fact, fit in with the sequel.

It seemed to her that Ethan must have done something subsequently which had estranged them.

He lavished money and care upon his wife, true; but his demeanour was as calm as if they had been an old married couple. He was an attentive and useful friend; not by any means a bridegroom with his honeymoon still before him.

And Hermia? Her attitude also seemed to need some explaining. Sir Tom denied it. He said in effect that Ethan was determined to do nothing to force the pace. He had almost lost his bride, now he would do nothing to jeopardise his future happiness. Until the girl was wholly recovered he had packed the lover away in a locked trunk. He was overdoing it, granted. All the better. She would be piqued. Nothing could be more certain than that she would herself make some advance, do something to prick him out of his determined self-denial.

That day was the first indication which Lady Glen had perceived of any impatience of the present position in Hermia. With interest she awaited results.

* * * * *

The two men, who had been a long tramp together, duly returned in time for tea, which the four of them drank under the verandah. The Glendavids afterwards went to the library to consider some letters arrived by the second post.

Storm sat on, luxuriously stretched in a deck chair, and Hermia leaned on the terrace gazing away over the lake.

Suddenly she looked back at him over her shoulder. "Like to go out in the boat? I'll scull you to Le Monceau if you like?"

His surprise brought him bolt upright. "My dear girl! I sit still while you work?"

She turned and faced him, leaning her arms on the balustrade behind her. "Please understand that you must leave off considering me an invalid. I'm as strong as a horse, and exercise is good for me. I know I've been ill; but even brain fever doesn't last for ever. I'm well now, and I want to go to England. I ought to go to Courland Meynell and see what you have been doing there, ought I not?"

Storm rose, flung his cigarette end over the balustrade into the lake, thrust his hands into his pockets and turned to her. "Come along. Let's go on the water as you suggest, and we can discuss plans. I'm glad to hear you think of moving, and I may as well own that I am anxious to obtain your opinion of what Benson and I have done."

He spoke in the level voice he always now used to her, he wore still that mask of conventional friendliness to which he had accustomed her during the winter. The look and the voice both daunted her.

During her months of convalescence she had automatically rejected thought, because it hurt her head to think. Life at the villa flowed on easily and even merrily. Lady Glendavid had a large circle of acquaintances and Hermia was never dull.

Lately, however, thought had grown insistent. The horrible moments of the day her memory loathed would rise before her. Sometimes it seemed to her that she had been mad; sometimes as though Storm had been fiendishly cruel.

Never once since had she had the chance to find out what he really thought about it all.

The man who had (as she knew from Meakins) sat by her bedside day after day while she raved in delirium calling for Guy, had emerged from that ordeal unconquered, but not unchanged. Beneath his manner there peeped a hardness of which she was well aware, and which was a completely new thing in him.

It was as if she had made him suffer the ultimate pang and he knew himself henceforth invulnerable.

As Sir Tom had prophesied, she found herself curious, desirous of ascertaining what lay beneath the surface that looked so smooth and felt so hard.

Her recent suggestion had been in the nature of a test, but it had told her little. That her decision to go and look at Courland Meynell gave him satisfaction was evident. At least he showed no reluctance; but of the joy or eagerness, such as in her more san-

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guine moments she hoped for, not a trace.

The die was cast. She was bound for England—England in March, with its dust, cold winds, driving hail-storms; and all for nothing! She would travel with that same wooden automaton who once had been her devout lover. She went to bed that night depressed and discouraged. Only her promise to Lady Glen prevented her from cancelling her determination to leave the villa.

Meakins, from whom she had expected opposition, offered none. The sniffs at the rashness of daring the March climate in England which she had expected, were not forthcoming.

“Well,” observed the thin woman, dexterously inserting the hanger into the frock from which Her-mia had just emerged, “the flowers here are lovely, but I won’t say but what I’d be glad to smell an English primrose wood this spring.”

CHAPTER XX

A HOME-COMING

THE arrival of Lady Courland and Mr. Storm at Courland Meynell was in the nature of a surprise. Ethan laid his plans with his usual care, and they started from Switzerland, reaching Paris quite uneventfully. There they were greeted by the news of a miners' strike in England, which had crippled transport. The boat trains were not running, and the railway authorities thought it doubtful that they would be able to cross.

Ethan, however, considered it wiser not to stay in Paris, but to proceed to the coast so as to be ready to go on as speedily as opportunity offered. He chartered a car and they went to Calais by road. A friend of his, a man who had fought at his side in the war, happened to be there, having placed his fine and powerful steam yacht at the service of the Government. He was just starting for Weymouth, with a cargo of mails, and he gladly undertook to convey the little party.

Nothing could have been more convenient for the travellers, since it was an easy motor drive from Weymouth to Courland; but as a result of this fortunate chance, they reached their destination considerably sooner than they were expected.

Hermia was in good spirits. The whole journey had been an adventure, and Ethan's management of it compelled her admiration. Never for a moment had he lost his temper, never seemed to be at the end of his resources. He had so arranged that she travelled in perfect comfort and without fatigue. He possessed a curious gift for being present when he was wanted and never when she would rather be without him. He was to all appearance quite at his ease with her; but he never dropped his mask.

Somersetshire is a green and billowy county, with ferny hollows, verdant pastures, and also barren moors. Courland Meynell stood under the brow of a hill or range of hills which sloped to the south-east. The wide prospect it commanded was one of its chief beauties.

Young Benson had not attempted to alter its uncompromisingly early nineteenth-century appearance. It had a good porch, set upon Doric columns, standing upon an entablature of four shallow steps. These columns now gleamed white with their renewed paint, and the whole of the wall was a uniform pleasant grey with fresh plaster. The grass round which the approach swept, was emerald green and shaven as only English lawns can be shaven.

"Why, how well it looks—almost pretty—what has Mr. Benson done with it?" said Hermia eagerly. "I thought it was so hideous when I was here last, but somehow it looks in keeping with its surroundings—all green and white!"

"I fancy Benson has done the only possible thing—let it alone," replied Ethan. "I am very glad you

like it. One dare not tamper with these Victorian houses; windows, doors, everything, won't bear any variation. I personally like those demi-lune bays with the high sash windows—they suggest a spacious comfort without ostentation."

"Certainly I don't detest it half as much as I thought I did," she answered; and as she spoke the car drew up before the porch, and out of a long window that stood open on that side of the mansion, popped Frank Benson, his hair rough, his general appearance rather dishevelled.

"Hallo!" cried he; "is it really you? Why, I didn't expect you until to-morrow at the earliest! Have you flown across?"

Greetings were exchanged and explanations furnished. Benson was delighted to see Hermia looking, as he declared, so well and so lovely. "I haven't the vaguest idea what I'm to call you, are you Mrs. Storm, or still Lady Courland?" he asked, laughing.

"She is still Lady Courland," said Storm quietly, "and you will like to know that as far as the exterior of this place goes, she is pleased with what we have done."

"That bucks me no end, and I do hope that she will pass the interior, too; but of course, Lady Courland, you must say if you don't like anything, and I shall do my utmost to get it to suit you. There's one thing, however, that I've done which I'm more doubtful about. Shouldn't have done it of course, if I had known you were coming to-day—I mean, letting your friends stay here last night. I believe they expect to stay to-night also," he added uneasily.

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"Our friends! What friends?" echoed husband and wife together.

Frank stopped short. "You know they are here? I mean you knew they were coming, did you not? Mr. and Mrs. Dinsmore——"

He was astonished at the momentary flash in Storm's eyes. "*Dinsmore?* You say Dinsmore is *here*—in my wife's house?"

"They came yesterday, with an order to view," stammered Benson. "They are going to take the house——"

"*Going to take the house?* Who says so?"

"The agent wrote a letter of introduction. They are offering you a very fine rent—considerably more than the late tenant paid——"

"Really, Frank, do you tell me that these people are actually domiciled in the house?"

Frank, quite out of countenance, mumbled something about the strike and their not being able to get away. "Of course I knew that Dinsmore is a relative and his wife a personal friend of Lady Courland. She had no doubt that you would extend your hospitality for a night or so, as there are so many measurements to make."

Hermia, who had not said one word, was standing, still wearing her long fur coat, close to her husband. She laid her hand on his arm, making a little motion toward the waiting car. "Shall we go?" she asked.

She spoke but the three words, but something in her tone seemed to relieve Storm of a terrible apprehension. He turned to her, looking down into her

eyes for some seconds without speaking. It was the first time he had allowed his look to meet hers since their wedding day.

"No," he said at last, "we shall not go. They will."

He turned to Benson. "Don't worry, Frank. This is not your fault," said he kindly. "Will you tell me where these people are at the moment?"

"I believe," stammered the young man, "that they're in the stable. They said at breakfast that they should want to build a new garage, and they fancied you would not have any objection. Mrs. Dinsmore has a way of carrying all before her—I am awfully sorry, sir, but what could I do?"

"Nothing. I don't blame you at all; but you can do something for me now. Take Lady Courland into that room close by, where you work, and let her and her maid rest there while I interview Mr. and Mrs. Dinsmore."

Hermia instantly turned to go in the direction in which he pointed. Just as she was moving across the hall, an exclamation was heard from above, and in a moment Nora Dinsmore came flying down the stairs, followed more slowly by her husband.

"Why I do declare they're here—Hermia and Mr. Storm! Oh, my dear girl, what a pleasure, they didn't think you'd get here to-day, and I was afraid we'd just miss! Has Mr. Benson told you we mean to take your white elephant off your hands for you? We shan't haggle over terms, be sure of that—why, you do look well! I was told you had been ill the whole winter, but I can't believe it——"

She had poured out all this and more before she

became aware of the immobility and silence of the Countess.

"What is it, my dear? Are we *de trop*?" she asked sharply and suddenly.

Guy had hesitated at the back of the hall, by the stair-foot. Such a changed Guy! Five months of matrimony had coarsened him and he was beginning to grow stout.

"Nora!" he called hoarsely; and his wife, utterly amazed at Hermia's attitude, turned towards him, bewildered. "What have I done? Put my foot in it?" she demanded somewhat truculently.

Storm went up to her and shook hands gravely.

"I regret that you have come here under a complete misapprehension, Mrs. Dinsmore. The agents blundered. This house is not to let, neither is it for sale. I am sorry the strike has delayed you here, but the car now waiting at the door can take you wherever you wish to go. Do not let me keep you. I am sure you will excuse my wife, she has just completed a long journey, and must rest at once."

Hermia, who had not said a word, bowed slightly and walked silently after young Benson into his office, followed by Meakins, who passed Mrs. Dinsmore as though she were a disagreeable smell.

Nora, flushed, handsome and indignant, turned upon Storm angrily.

"I suppose I may venture to ask why an old friend like myself is treated in this manner?"

"Believe me, Mrs. Dinsmore, I would not hurt your feelings if I could avoid it. Your husband has exposed you to this and you must go to him for explana-

tions. I can only tell you that he is not, and never will be, welcome in our house, and that he certainly will never become our tenant. You will, I am sure, agree that, this being so, the sooner you can leave, the better for all parties."

"Guy, what does he mean?" she demanded with pardonable warmth.

"He's mistaken his vocation, my dear. Nature intended him for a Methodist parson. But his insolence is a new phase. I had better remove you out of reach of it as soon as may be."

"Did you know, when you brought me here, that he had a grudge against you?"

"One never knows, with people of his stamp," returned her husband, with an aspect of weary patience. "Come along upstairs and pack your suit-case."

"And be quick about it," cut in Ethan, "or you may get what I threatened you with last time we met. Mrs. Dinsmore, please believe that I would have saved you this. If it hadn't been for his impertinence in daring to come here, you would have heard nothing about it. Now be quiet," he went on, turning upon Guy, who had begun to speak, "one more speech like the last, and I'll throw you out, as I did last time you tried it."

"Good heavens, Guy, he's mad! Ought we to leave her with him?"

But Guy turned his back and walked to the stairs. "Come along—no sense in a vulgar row," he growled.

"But, Guy, what does he mean? What does he mean?" pleaded Nora, half sobbing as she followed him to the rooms they had occupied. "Tell me—you

must! How dare he use such language, adopt such an attitude, to you?"

He turned about with a livid, tortured face.

"If you must know, I'll tell you. You remember that just after we were married I got a wire from poor little Hermia, saying the old Pippin had passed in his checks and she was all alone. As I'm the only relative she's got I went to see what I could do for her, and I found this beast in possession. He had come to her in her extremity and put the screw on. I don't know if he'd been lending the poor old bounder money, but he may have. Anyway he had used his money and his position to bully her into marrying him; and I lost my temper and told him what I thought of him."

"But surely—surely that wouldn't make *her* so icy—why should it?"

"Can't you see that he's got her completely scared? He's been doing the lion-taming act, and he's broken the spirit of that free, fierce little thing! Poor girl, it makes one sick to see her. Not a word could she say. Horrible! These strait-laced men always have a streak of cruelty in their make-up. Hurry now, Nora, with your packing—better ring for the maid——"

"You mean we are actually turned out—driven from the house as if we were tramps! And does he mean it, what he said about not selling or letting? Oh, Guy, I don't believe I would have married you if I hadn't thought this place would be ours, with its county position and all! If we bought this we should have had everything but the title, and I could make such a charming place of it! And everybody here—

abouts knows you! To go and take some place in another part of England won't be a bit the same!"

"My dear, we needn't go to another part—we can buy something in the district if we choose. The whole of this estate, except just the house and park, is mortgaged, and we could use some other name, put somebody up to bid, and get possession of all the Fratterley woods. You might build a place there to put this in the shade. Why not? I'd like to spoil his game—settle close by, so that we could hold out a helping hand to poor little Hermie——"

"That's an idea, certainly. Meanwhile I suppose we can do nothing but leave her to his tender mercies?"

He turned away with an inarticulate sound, and began to bundle things into a suit-case.

Nora stood silent awhile, trying to fit in what he had just said of Storm with her idea of the man.

Presently Guy came from his dressing-room, hair brushes in one hand, silk pajamas in another. He gave a sudden chuckle.

"Nora, I've had an inspiration! I've just remembered something, and unless he opens and reads her letters, I can spike his guns nicely for him! Shouldn't think he'd overlook her correspondence, she's so thoroughly tamed, he wouldn't think it necessary. Shove in those things—I'll ring for the man to strap these bags—come on, let's get clear of the place, and then I'll tell you something I heard by accident, when I was staying up there in his mouldy castle. He's not quite the blameless lad he's cracked up to be! And she shall know it. Remember the secret way into the state bedroom?"

CHAPTER XXI

"JOOTY"

WHEN the car containing the Dinsmores had hummed away down the curving drive, Storm turned from the door, strode across the hall and entered the room wherein his wife still sat. She was alone, for Benson had discreetly withdrawn, and Meakins had gone to prepare for her mistress upstairs.

Hermia was seated by the table, her chin propped on her hand, studying some of Benson's neat plans. As Ethan entered she raised her eyes and met his look quite steadily if somewhat coldly. Since her wedding-day it had been he who indicated the lines of their formal intercourse, and if he wished to change them, she was determined that the move must come from him.

Apparently he had not the least intention of the kind.

"Sorry," he said calmly, "for such an unpleasant home-coming. Who could have foreseen such effrontery? I can blame myself only in one respect; but that ought to be immediately put right."

He sat down at the table, facing her, and asked in a gentler tone, "I hope it hasn't rattled you badly?"

She laughed contemptuously. “Do I appear badly rattled?”

“Not at all, for which I’m thankful. You must come upstairs and rest until dinner-time, but as you seem so well, may I first plague you with five minutes’ business conversation?”

“Do. I am a little curious to know what is the point on which you blame yourself.”

“It is that I have not definitely ordered the various house-agents who have this place on their lists, to refrain—at least for a time—from issuing orders to view. I was really waiting to know what you feel about it.”

She stared down reflectively at the tinted sheet of oiled paper on the table. “I suppose you mean—~~do~~ I still wish to find a tenant for this house, or would I like to occupy it myself?”

“Just that.”

“But I’m not in a position to say, am I? . . . I have not the money to keep the place up, even if I wished it.”

“Have you forgotten that on a certain occasion I endowed you with all my worldly goods? Pray make the most of the one advantage you have gained. If you wish to keep this house, I am ready to enable you to do so.”

Surprise caused her to colour, but she permitted herself no other sign. After pondering the drawings during another pause, she said at last, “I should like to know what *you* think about it. What is best? What, in your opinion, ought I to do?”

“You ask for my advice? If I give it, remember,

it's only advice. The sole thing that counts is your own feeling in the matter; but here's my view, for what it is worth. The inheritor of an old name and title seems to me to be in a responsible position. If it doesn't sound too uncompromising I would say he or she is not quite a free agent. Something is owed to the past, much to the future. These lands have for centuries nurtured your forefathers. This is your place of origin as a family. It is my old-fashioned opinion that responsibilities create duties——"

As he said the word, Hermia dared to look up at him with a smile; for at Romaldscar there had been a joke about the word duty, which old Hart, the butler, always pronounced "Jooty." "That young man, sir, don't understand his jooties——"

If Storm did not smile an answer with his mouth, his eyes danced. "Oh yes, I know! The word Jooty has been wiped clean off the map by the new generation; and as you know, I admit your right to your own point of view. If you tell me that you deny any claim upon you that these old acres represent, I shall do my best to negotiate a sale for you as advantageously as possible. I ought perhaps to point out in passing that when once you have sold, you have no more say in the matter. The Dinsmores might, and probably would, purchase it from the buyers. If, on the other hand, you reflect that in future years your"——he hesitated for hardly a second——"your *descendants* might reproach you with the sale of their heritage, I am willing to put you in a position to retain it, and in that case I think I had better pay off all the mortgages and start fair with the estate unencumbered."

This time her surprise was so great that she raised her head and stared at him. “You would do that? . . . Forgive the liberty I take in asking, but—can you afford it?”

He smiled.

“If I do this, I should have to look upon it in the light of an investment. Benson has been prospecting over the whole estate most carefully, going thoroughly into the question of fertility and the probabilities of a return. His conclusion is that it would repay us to redeem the mortgages and bring back the land into cultivation. I have a considerable amount of capital at my disposal, besides that upon which my income depends; and this would be the way in which I should prefer to lay it out; bringing men on to the land and farming it well. If such is your pleasure I can arrange this matter without much inconvenience; but naturally I don’t want to put down so large a sum unless you are quite sure that you do wish it.”

She listened with tightly clasped hands and bent head. *Her descendants!* He had brought himself to say it. He had then the idea that she and he might one day be reconciled? She tried to visualise the life of “Jooty”—the life to which she would stand committed; saw herself as wife and mother, living mostly in the country; as Guy had foretold, laying the foundation stones of concrete cottages! She gave a little gasp and said nothing.

“I ought, perhaps,” he went on musingly, “to warn you of one thing. If I do this, I could not also afford to buy you a London house—at least, not for a year or so. You would have to be content with hiring one,

or with a suite in an hotel for the season."

It was as though he had read the thoughts in her mind, and she felt confused—overwhelmed.

"Will you let me think it over?" at last she murmured rather hurriedly. "I should like first to go round the place with you and Mr. Benson—to inspect the house, then the grounds, and after that, all that belongs to the Courlands. I want to inform myself before I decide."

"An excellent plan," he answered cordially, as the door opened to admit Meakins.

"Everything is ready for you now, melady," said she, "and the new bath-rooms are working, so Mr. Benson said I was to tell you——"

"Delightful!" Hermia sprang up, not at all like an invalid. "By the way," she turned to Ethan—"what does our staff consist of?"

He looked somewhat embarrassed.

"I sent for half a dozen of the Romaldscar household," he replied, "and I understand Mrs. Brough has filled in her *cadre* from local sources. I hope you'll be comfortable, and that you won't think I have taken too much upon myself, but I didn't see how you could collect a staff until you came to England."

"You're a perfect marvel," she told him quite gaily as she turned and went upstairs.

"Oh, melady, melady, I hope and trust——" began Meakins lugubriously, as soon as they were shut in to their own premises. "When I saw that young black-guard, daring to show his false face here——"

Hermia, motionless in the centre of the room, put out a hand to stop her. She was in too great confusion

of mind to be able to discuss anything. What had been her feeling when she saw Guy once more? . . . Such a soiled, spoiled Guy! Six months ago she had believed herself to be his, body and soul, for ever. The idea that such devouring passion could pass had been simply unthinkable.

To-day's sight of the idol—stout and sleek, subdued to the position of the rich woman's husband—had, quite simply, made her feel sick.

Yet she was shaken—consumed with a fierce regret, a wild grief that her dream had gone for ever, that life in the future no longer held the ideal companion, the beloved who was of her world, who liked the same music, the same kind of dinner that she did, whose idea of pleasure was exactly the same as hers. How joyously they could have danced together down the primrose path, now closed for ever to her longing feet!

She turned her thought inward, picturing for a moment her life as it must now be. Could she stand it? The austerity, the propriety, that Ethan demanded? It was happiness, not duty that she craved. Nora had stolen her happiness from her, had bought the man she loved; and she knew that Nora had been cheated of her bargain. Guy was not Nora's lover—one glance at the couple had shown Hermia that.

All wrong! All awry! Everyone wrongly paired!

“I need an aim in life,” thought she, “and if I sell this place I shall have nothing.” The thought was an arresting one. Would it be possible to take a real interest in this cradle of her race? At least, it might be better than nothing.

Standing at the window she gazed upon the dignified undulations of the park, the clumps of beech and oak, ash and hornbeam. She could descry a herd of deer moving slowly across a green ride flanked with chestnut trees, just coming into bud.

Her room was spacious, restful. Nothing was cramped, nothing crowded. This was eminently a house in which to rear a family. Pshaw! People don't have families in these days. It simply isn't done!

. . . A house in town! He had practically said that if they sold Courland Meynell he would buy her a house in London. She could then give herself the extreme gratification of being Lady Courland with the money to support her position. She could turn the tables upon all those family connections who had ignored her, snubbed her, cold-shouldered her! She could plunge into gaiety, collect acquaintance, force herself to forget the misery that still gnawed her flinching heart. When at last she was ready for dinner, she had almost determined to choose the London house, and let this abode of the kinsfolk she despised pass into the hands of others.

On her way downstairs she walked through the picture-gallery, with the object of seeing whether the pictures had been re-hung, so as to hide the gap left by the beautiful Hoppner group.

To her surprise it still occupied its usual place of honour. Still the little girl in white clutched her scarlet ball, still the glowing boy, who had afterwards grown into her sour great-grandfather, flourished his battledore as he leaned upon his mother's knee.

It was still there!

She hastened to find Ethan, but he was not in the drawing-room, wherein a huge fire blazed its welcome. He did not join her till the roll of the gong was heard reverberating among suits of armour and antlers and old weapons.

She was so eager to know that she forgot to be distant. “Ethan! Ethan! Did you buy back the Hoppner?”

“Ah, so you’ve noticed that, have you? Yes, I did. You may remember that you admitted to me in Dieppe that you had been obliged to sell, and the bank produced Agnew’s cheque for me, so I knew the price he paid. I went to him, explained that the sale was a mistake, and offered him a fair percentage on his price. Fortunately, Colonel Brice was a good customer of his—you may have noticed the pictures at Romaldscar—and he let me have it back. I was so afraid the Dinsmores would get it.”

She remarked thoughtfully as they entered the dining-room together, “Even if we sold the estate we need not sell the portraits. They could go to your London house if you bought one?”

“Certainly.” He said no more for the moment, but when they were seated at table he added—“You’ve made up your mind then?”

“Oh, no!” she spoke instantly. “I haven’t made it up at all. One can’t arrive at a decision like that in a minute.”

“I agree with you.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE COUNTESS AT HOME

HER ladyship did not come downstairs to breakfast next morning, but made her appearance about eleven o'clock looking rested and vigorous. Ethan and Benson were awaiting her and they began their tour with the kitchen premises, which had been completely re-modelled on modern lines.

Hart, the butler, and Mrs. Brough then begged that they would do them the honour of coming into the servants' hall for a few minutes, to receive a wedding gift from the staff, there assembled.

It was a complete set of cut glass goblets and wine glasses for the table, and had been chosen with taste. Hart made a speech wishing long life and prosperity to them both, and Hermia, to her rage, felt her face hot and her voice unsteady as she thanked them, not daring to look at her husband.

As they were passing back through the hall, the telephone rang, and Benson said awkwardly, "Oh, I expect that's the Padre, he said he'd ring me up sometime when you came back. No doubt somebody has told him that you rolled up yesterday."

He took up the receiver, and after a time said: "Yes, it is Mr. Furnival. He wants to know which day the Countess would fix to come to the schools and

receive the congratulations and gift of the village. He's a rattling good sort," he added, his hand over the receiver, "and they seem to be no end bucked in the village, to think they are to have you living here. They hated those Yanks, and of course for years old Lord Courland spent no money, did nothing for the tenants. When I went round and ordered a few urgent repairs to be made it was really pathetic to see their astonishment and pleasure."

Hermia, considerably embarrassed, looked up to meet Ethan's eyes upon her quizzically. "Well," said he, "what does her ladyship reply to these rustic courtesies?"

She murmured: "They ought to be thanking *you*, not me?"

"However you decide about staying here, I think perhaps you ought to do as they ask," he replied, in the same undertone.

"Settle it, please, as you think best," she muttered, turning away.

In the afternoon they sallied forth with a small car, which Frank had succeeded in hiring, and went to the farthest limits of the property. Acting upon a hint from Storm, Benson took Hermia to look at her cottages in a wretched hamlet known as Fratterly, where the folks were half gipsy, and less than half civilised.

She saw rotten thatch, pools of drainage, waterless dwellings, crumbling woodwork and earthen floors.

Six of the hovels were condemned as unfit for human habitation—impossible to repair.

"This," she cried vehemently, "ought to be attended to before anything is done to the big house."

"I fear little can be done until you decide whether to keep or sell," replied Ethan. "To put this property in order will be a long and costly business. We cannot do for one tenant what we will not do for another. If we sell, I should not be justified in such an outlay. When we know what our intentions are, we can get on with it. Frank has all his estimates made and plans prepared, have you not?"

Frank had brought his drawings with him, and they sat down upon a boulder, using another as a table, and looked at a group of six little dwellings, cleverly adapted to the local style, standing picturesquely, each in its own garden.

"We could get these put up in six months," he said. "They could be occupied before winter. The rents they are now paying would be enough, poor souls, to give a very minute profit on the cost."

"*Rent!* They are paying *rent* for those pest-houses?"

"They are indeed; and some of them have been out of work all winter."

She cried: "But can't we give them work?"

"We have. They are all busy now; but we can't say whether the new owners of the estate would keep them on. That would all depend upon what they decided to do with the land."

"What should *you* do with it?" Hermia turned vehemently to Storm.

"I should farm—extensively and intensively. This land is good—very fertile. I should put many acres of it into cultivation, which are now only grass land waste. Frank is sure this could be done without

sacrificing the deer-park, or spoiling our view from the house. There's a stretch of outlying land at the extreme end of the estate which the little seaside town of Moorbeach is anxious to buy for golf links. We should advise granting a long lease of that. There is also a small bit for which a speculative builder would give a high price, and the loss of which we should hardly feel. We estimate that we could make a profit even in the first year, though as you may suppose, it would take many years to pay off the cost of redeeming the mortgages."

"Who would be in charge? I mean, you would want an agent to work the estate."

Ethan smiled, looking at her meaningly. "I have an idea that Frank might take it on," said he. "He's thinking of getting married, you know."

"Not to Heather Morley?" cried Hermia; and when she knew that this was so, she burst into hearty congratulations.

"That settles it," said she, when her felicitations had been duly acknowledged. "I think the die is cast. I shall have to keep Courland Meynell."

"You'll find it a good house for a big house party," observed Storm. "Not a small, dull one, such as I evolved at Romaldscar, but a really hilarious one, of your choosing, Hermia. Golf links should be an attraction to your guests, and I believe they talk of a casino at Moorbeach."

She laughed. "You go pretty fast. I haven't said anything irrevocable yet." But she knew that she had made her decision. "Jooty" had gained the day.

It was astonishing how quickly the new life reached

out and laid its hands upon Hermia. She, the nomad, who all her life had had no obligations, no real home, now found herself obliged to realise that Hermie Meynell and her father, the Bohemian artist, were a very different proposition from the Countess of Courland, just come into residence with her wealthy husband. Before she could have thought it possible, the county flowed in upon her—weather-beaten squires and their hard-riding ladies, generals, clergy and J.P.'s.

Of Ethan she saw very little, for he was in the thick of the work he loved. He went up to London for three days to interview the lawyers in charge of the estate; and he went armed with full powers by his wife to make what arrangements suited him best.

The elderly head of the firm of Tickner and Bell remarked after his visit that he was an example of that rare combination, the gentleman and the business man.

The head of Lennard and Lennard, another firm, of a different type, acting for Mr. and Mrs. Dinsmore, ruefully admitted that there were no flies on Storm when it came to a deal. Their attempt to buy the Fratterly woods from the holders of the mortgage was quite futile. Acting on behalf of the Countess, her husband had secured the whole estate.

The following week was Holy Week, and Hermia was destined to experience a whole set of new experiences.

For the first time in her life she found herself in contact with a man who believed that his duty to his religion called upon him to fast. To her speechless

amazement he went out to church every morning during the week, and every evening as well.

He never made the slightest suggestion that she should accompany him, nor any comment upon her failure to do so.

The awkward moment for her came when the Padre, Mr. Furnival, arrived to call upon her at a little past three o'clock one afternoon, Storm being out with Benson as usual.

The vicar was no longer young, and had a strenuous record behind him of work in the slums of a Welsh seaport. Secure in his belief that the Countess and her husband must of necessity be like-minded, he poured out to her his pleasure in finding a kindred spirit, and his deep thankfulness that the neglected village was once more to be taken in hand.

"Among all the big estates round here, there is hardly a household that comes to church," he told her. "The example Mr. Storm is setting will be of more value than you can imagine. I am truly grieved to hear from him how ill you have been this winter. You must be most careful not to run the risk of taking cold in this treacherous weather, after the sunshine of the south. But I do hope you may be able to come to church on Easter Day. Mr. Storm has promised to play for us, and is teaching the boys to sing Merbecke."

"He is wonderful," smiled Hermia, who had not the remotest idea of what Merbecke might be.

"Indeed he is! He intends to raise a troop of Boy Scouts, which is what I have longed for and could not get anyone to help me to do! With him to back me

up, I shall indeed 'thank God and take courage'! And now I mustn't keep you, Lady Courland. All I wanted was just to welcome you personally, Storm warned me I must on no account tire you; but I should like to persuade you to fix a day in next week to come to the schools and receive the wedding present which the village is anxious to present."

Hermia gave a little cry. "Oh, Mr. Furnival! Those poor creatures! Living in those outrageous hovels! Actually having to *pay* to live there! How could I face them? Stand up before them and take their money?——"

He smiled humorously. "Has that struck you? It is good to know that you feel so; but as a matter of fact I don't think the Fratterly contingent has subscribed anything. You must keep two things in mind: first of all that you have some very well-to-do tenants—this is a part of England where farming pays; and secondly, that if you take from the poor the joy of giving, you take from them one of their greatest and rarest pleasures. To see you really delighted with what they offer will give them far more pride and gladness than it would to receive a gift from you. If you promise them that their bit of silver shall be used at your table every day, to remind you of them all, they will be your friends for ever."

When they had fixed the day he took his leave, with cordial handclasp. "There's a great work before you, Lady Courland, and it's the kind of work that brings a blessing."

She tried to bring herself to tell him that all such work was entirely out of her line—that she could do

nothing—but he was gone, with the air of having much upon his hands and not a moment to waste, which was so conspicuous in her husband.

“What can I do?” she cried later to Ethan, when she, he, and Frank Benson were sitting at dinner that evening. “I can’t run Girl Guides, or take Mothers’ Meetings or teach in Sunday Schools! Why, the children in the infant classes know more theology than I do!”

“Of course you can’t do such things as you suggest,” replied Storm coolly, “but you can do what they really want, smile and look lovely. You can open bazaars and spend money upon embroidered cushions and gilt baskets——”

“And lay the foundation stones of concrete cottages!” she added with a little peal of somewhat unreal laughter.

“By Jove, yes, Lady Courland, you’ve hit it!” cried Frank, “you must do that for us—at Fratterly! I say, you will, won’t you? It would have a most encouraging effect! Wouldn’t it, Mr. Storm?”

“If you want her to stay for that you must be quick with your specifications, Frank,” said Storm with a grave smile. “Her ladyship won’t be able to stand much more rusticity. She’ll be off to town in a week or two—won’t you, Hermia? By the way, did I tell you that Eleanor wants to let her house in Brownlow Street for the season? Flaunden and she have gone to South America to see some land he owns out there; and I thought it might be quite a good scheme for us to be her tenants. You’ve seen the house—what do you say?”

Hermia looked across the table at him in wonder. He was so much more adroit than she had thought possible. He had screened her delinquencies from the Padre on the score of health; now he foresaw that she was near the breaking point and showed her the way out with ease and simplicity.

He was ordering his own life in his own way, but evidently she was to be free to do the same.

"Eleanor Lowrie's house!" she repeated. "It was there that I first met you."

"I hope," he said, with a twist of the mouth, "that the fact won't set you against it."

CHAPTER XXIII

TOWN GOSSIP

PRUE MERRIDEW emerged from Trufitt's freshly shampooed, waved and manicured, feeling at peace with all the world.

Bond Street was smiling in June sunshine and choc-a-block with all the traffic of the season—just as Prue liked it. She stood for a moment beside her car, reflecting as she pulled on a glove; then——

"I forgot," said she to her chauffeur, "that I promised to look in at the Jim Cros Exhibition. I think I'll walk that far. You go away now and call for me there—the Galloway Galleries—in an hour's time."

"Very good, melady."

The car glided off and Prue moved slowly up the street, in her ball-room slippers, short frock and peach-coloured hat, still wrestling with one finger of her glove, which would not go on smooth. She was thinking of Hermia's boy-and-girl dance, which was to be that evening, and at which there was to be nobody present whose age was more than five-and-thirty. You might be as much married as you liked (and some of the friends going in Prue's party were considerably so); but your age must positively not exceed the limit.

The cream of the joke was that the men in par-

ticular were, as Prue remarked, filling up the census incorrectly in order to wangle an invitation. It was quite a small dance—only thirty couples in all—and there had been more competition for it than for any of the functions in Hermia's set this season.

Hermia and Prue had had great sport curled up on cushiony divans, searching Debrett for dates of birth; and even (in the case of those so unhappy as not to be Debretted) visiting Somerset House for birth certificates!

Naturally, certain favoured mortals were treated as exceptions by the unscrupulous pair, who were having the time of their lives. For the past two months, in fact ever since Lady Courland's arrival in Brownlow Street, Park Lane, had been duly chronicled in the *Morning Post*, she and Prue had been inseparable.

"I make only one condition, my girl," the young Countess had said, "but I must make that, because you are related to my detestable family. It is that you never ask me to meet the Dinsmores. If you do, I shall cut them dead; and it's of no use for you to ask me why, for I shan't tell you."

"Well, I don't believe somehow that they're in town," Prue had replied wonderingly. "I was told that Nora was going to buy Bobbie's house in Belgrave Square; but she hasn't. Old Pinter the brewer—the Pint Pot, as Charlie calls him—has got it. Guy and Nora seem to have changed all their plans, for when I met her at Harrogate she told me they were going to buy Courland Meynell—in fact they were just off to look it over and see what renovations

it needed. Your keeping it was a nasty knock for her; I think she thought she was going to be Lady Courland in everything but the title."

"She was very silly then. My husband wouldn't hear of my giving it up."

"Quite right, too. Why, your boy will be the Earl, won't he?"

"My *boy*?"

"Your son, when you have one. You'll have to make up your mind to that, my dear. Retire to Courland Meynell for six months and the thing is done. It's your duty——"

Hermia covered her ears with her hands. "Speak the word 'Jooty' and I scream," said she firmly. "I'm young, and Ethan gives me all I want—in reason. I'm out for a lark, not 'Jooty' just now, and so I tell you."

"Don't blame you," replied the other butterfly gaily, remembering Uncle Joe and the circumstances of Hermia's life the previous year. "We can only be young once, as I keep on telling Charlie, but he says we all insist upon staying young too long. You're a lucky girl, Herm; but, of course, we haven't many of us your looks. It would have been odd if you couldn't wangle a fortune; and your Ethan seems to be more worldly-wise than I gave him credit for. When we heard you were married to him I said to Charlie: 'Mark my words, that poor child will be in for a baby just in the middle of next season.' I thought he'd insist. That kind of man, somehow."

"Oh!" Hermia had replied airily, "he has plenty of sense. I am, as you say—lucky."

Prue, flitting up Bond Street in the sunshine, thought of her friend's luck with some envy. To have all that money, and a husband who seemed quite willing to efface himself!

"I wonder," thought she, her wits busy under her yellow shingle, "what the Dinsmores did to get his goat—or Hermia's! She said she wouldn't speak to them; and, come to think of it, it's very queer that Nora is not flaunting her handsome husband everywhere. She was glad enough to get him!"

Hardly had the thought crossed her mind when she saw Nora Dinsmore herself approaching, strolling down the street, in elegant attire, and looking to be in the best of health and spirits.

The two greeted one another with cordiality, for each was bursting to hear anything that the other had to tell.

"Where are you bound for?" cried Prue. "I'm going to peep in at the Jim Cros Exhibition; everyone's going there. You know he's the rage just now—sees everything scarlet—the stonework of Westminster Abbey and so on; but human faces he sees green—bright green. The Duchess of Dumbelfries sat to him, and her husband won't pay for the portrait. He's simply furious, and it's on show here at the Galloway Galleries and, of course, everyone's been to look, and Dodo Farington says there is a strong likeness, though of course a hateful one; she says she doesn't wonder the duke was wild! Now do come with me and let's have tea—Jim Cros gives tea, thrown in—admission is five bob—and a good talk. I want to know why you and Guy are not in town."

"Oh, that's soon answered," replied Nora gaily. "We don't at all want to settle down yet into the respectable married couple and give stuffy dinner-parties; we want to have our fling first. We're off to the Rockies, and are only at Claridge's just for a few days while we collect our kit."

She launched into a tempting description of their programme, while the two made their way into the galleries, and after some waiting and a certain amount of peevishness succeeded in finding a table and somebody to attend to them.

"Never does to come to this kind of place without a man," remarked Nora, sinking into a luxurious basket chair. "No waitress can ever see a female customer. Something wrong with their eyesight."

They were soon deep in conversation of the kind they enjoyed and understood—the sole topic being themselves and their acquaintance. Prue waxed lyrical over Hermia's beauty and Hermia's wealth.

"Storm hasn't ruined himself, then, buying that white elephant of an estate with his last penny, in order to spite Guy and me?" inquired Nora. "He hasn't been able to run to a town house for her, has he?"

"No, they've got Eleanor Lowrie's house—I always think it's the prettiest in town——"

"Ugh! Park Lane!" disdainfully.

"No, Brownlow Street, which is quite different—oh, it's charming! And Hermia never crowds it! Why, at her boy-and-girl dance to-night there will only be thirty couples! What a pity she didn't know you were in town—shall I tell her you'd like to come?"

This daring shaft had the desired effect. Nora half believed that Prue knew nothing of the state of affairs. She laughed lightly but bitterly.

"Don't you know that Guy and I are exiled from the Storm Eden?" said she with much apparent carelessness. "Well, we are, and if you like I'll tell you why."

Prue wanted to know why, more than she wanted anything else at the moment. Flinging prudence to the winds she sighed, "*Oh do!*"

"Well, you know, Storm played a very dirty trick upon that poor child Hermia," sighed Nora. "From what you tell me it is not turning out quite so badly as I feared at first; but, as you know, she refused him up at Romaldscar and then—as soon as he knew she was out at Dieppe all by herself in a foreign hotel, her uncle dead, and no money—he cut in. My dear, he literally *bought* her! One hears of these marriages," sighed the widow of the Chicago pork packer, "but few of them are quite as blatant as this was. As you know, Guy was and is her only near relation, and he and I had been only a week married when he got a pitiful letter from her, saying what distress she was in. In spite of our honeymoon he hurried off, for we both thought it his duty; and he got there just too late. However, he's hot-headed, as you know, and he couldn't help letting off steam. He told Storm just exactly what he thought of him; and Storm will never forgive it."

This version of the matter was so eminently plausible that Prue felt half inclined to believe it. Nora enlarged upon the manifest illness of the bride, and

Guy's fury at the pressure put upon her. "Of course, if he had known it, she was much more ill even than he guessed! My dear, I tremble to think what must have happened after he left! He told me it made him positively sick to leave her, his only cousin, in the power of this man. As you know, it almost killed her—but she is young and healthy and so she recovered. How is she now?"

"Just lovely," averred Prue. "Of course, she has everything to show her off now. Sometimes she's quite dazzling."

"Poor thing," said Nora, very gravely. "If only she had waited just twenty-four hours, she'd never have married him."

"Why?"

"Not if she had known what Guy could tell her."

"Guy? About Ethan Storm do you mean?"

Nora nodded, but did not speak. It took considerable pressure to induce her to proceed. "You never heard anything of it? But then, of course, you never stayed at Romaldscar," said she meditatively. "I did, last year, as you know, and I heard something of it myself, but Guy heard *much* more."

By this time Prue would have given her best diamond to know more. Her hushed absorption was flattering and the narrator went on.

"Of course, you know how madly in love he was with Miss Lowrie! Well—why didn't she marry him? There can be very little doubt that old Brice left him the estate to enable him to marry her—feeling certain in his own mind that this is what would happen. Only, you see—it didn't."

"Storm in love with Eleanor? Are you sure?"

"My dear, ask anybody who knows them! Nobody in those parts had *any* doubt. The wife of the head master of Balderston told me herself how astonished everyone was when the expected match did not come off. She said they were not half so surprised at the fortune bequeathed to Storm as they were when he and Miss Lowrie failed to become engaged."

"And do you know why it fell through?"

"There seems very little doubt that Miss Lowrie found him out in time."

"Found out Ethan Storm?"

"Yes. Found out that he has been keeping a woman for years. You see, he had to hold on tight to his pious stunt because that was his long suit—his charm in the eyes of poor old Brice. And Eleanor is so noble, she could not stoop to tell tales——"

"Where did Guy hear all this?" burst in Prue.

"From a man called Redman, a sturdy dalesman, who keeps an inn, somewhere on Lancemoor. He told Guy that the supposition is that the girl is a daughter of Marnie Pickersgill, the witch by the waterfall. He says she was marvellously handsome. But the horrible thing is, that when he came into the property, he actually brought her up to Romaldscar, and keeps her there, hidden away in the Keep. Did Hermia ever tell you about the secret passage?"

"No—never! At Romaldscar?"

"Yes, indeed! We were all larking about there one day——" she launched into a description of the treasure hunt.

"So you see, he can always have her society without anyone being the wiser—she comes along the secret passage."

"And you think Lady Flaunden knew of this?"

"I think she must do. As I told you, she said nothing of it until the death of Colonel Brice, because I suppose she did not wish to wound him, nor to deprive Ethan of the fortune; but as soon as she was completely her own mistress, she must have let him see that she knew. I wonder if the Glendavids are in the secret. Redman told Guy that it is common talk in the Dale."

"What on earth would Hermia say if she knew that?"

"Oh, *she* won't know. Nobody would tell *her*—she'd be the very last person to hear of it."

Prue drew a long breath. "So that's the meaning of his going off alone to Romaldscar and leaving his wife behind! My word! If I were Hermia I would very soon give him a Roland for his Oliver."

"So would I," said Nora with a chuckle. She did not add that her fear lest Hermia might select Guy as her weapon of retaliation was her reason for the flight to the Rocky Mountains. She had her husband well in hand, and Storm had forbidden him the house. Nevertheless, forbidden fruit is sweet, and it is well to be on the safe side.

CHAPTER XXIV

AND THE DOOR WAS SHUT

IT was a curious thing that, upon the morrow of her deliriously successful boy-and-girl dance, the Countess should awaken in a mood of discontent. Yet so it was.

The sun was gay and she was due to ride with Prue and a contingent of last night's merry-makers: but she fretfully bade Meakins countermand her horse and announced that she should stay in bed till after lunch.

"What's the matter now?" asked Meakins in her usual blunt fashion as she lowered, in accordance with a snappish order, the blind she had just raised.

Hermia flung out her arms. "Too much gaiety, I expect, Meekie. Or—or possibly too much London——"

"Or possibly too much of your own way," observed the maid caustically. "You want Mr. Storm here, to set you to something useful."

Unexpectedly, a laugh bubbled out of Hermia, instead of the rebuke she intended to administer.

"I really do believe that it's Mr. Storm I want, Meekie."

"Well, you could have had him but for your own folly and madness," was the dry reply. "Now you've

lost him, and I don't expect you're going to find it so easy to whistle him back."

Hermia raised herself upright in her bed and stared at the impertinent speaker with wide eyes and crimson cheeks. "Meakins, you forget yourself."

"Yes, melady, I felt sure you'd think so. And I expect you'd find it more comfortable to have a maid of the new kind—one that'd help you to run downhill as fast as you want to go. I'm not like that."

"Are you giving me notice, Meekie?"

"That's as you wish, melady. I've thought more than once of late that *you* were on the point of telling *me* to go."

"How can you be so silly?" murmured Hermia lazily, sinking back on her pillows. "In these days nobody wants to sack any servant who is willing to stay. You know your power, you unprincipled woman; but don't you get too cheeky, or I'll tell Mr. Storm of you."

"I'm not afraid of that, melady. He told me himself he was happier, leaving you in my charge, than he would have been if you'd changed me for one of these fly-aways."

"Oh, you and he are a pair—old prunes-prism! Well! Now I feel a little better—bring me my letters, there's a dear."

Meakins placed a tray full of correspondence upon the table by the bed, and Hermia, leaning over it, idly pushed about the envelopes until she came upon one in her husband's cultivated script, small but not niggling, and extremely legible.

"Hallo, Meekie, what d'you think? He's coming up to town this very day. Shall you tell tales of me—eh?"

"You know better than that, melody; but well you know that I could, if I liked."

Hermia glanced up angrily. "You could tell tales of me? What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't I hear him beg of you not to gamble, melody? And what was you doing the other night, when Lady Merridew and Colonel and Mrs. Hayter and Sir Hugh Jenner were here?"

Hermia's cheeks were glowing. To cover her discomfort she took up and lit a cigarette from the table beside her bed. "You're an impertinent old woman, but what you say is right," she remarked after a pause. "It's a good thing he's coming. I think I'd better tell him, don't you? Although for a wonder I won that night instead of losing."

"Mr. Storm wouldn't think that made any difference at all. And now, melody, if I've spoken too free and you mean to part with me, I may as well out with the rest. What I want to say is this. Your husband is a gentleman in ten thousand; and if you let him go, you are not only doing wrong, you are acting very foolish. If you'd seen him as I saw him when they didn't think you would live—well, there! But something happened after that. I don't know what it was—but when Mr. Storm came to see you at the Villa, he was not the same at all."

"Something happened? What nonsense, Meekie! Nothing could happen. No. The thing between us is that he thinks I ought to beg his pardon; and I

haven't. Well! Anything for a quiet life! Perhaps I'd better do that, too."

"You'd best do anything you can to win him back, melody; but I'm thinking you'll not find it so easy now, after all this time."

Hermia laughed the little derisive laugh of the woman who believes triumphantly in her own charm.

"Go and make my bath, you old vixen, and put in those Houbigant salts that I love so much. I may as well tell you that I don't think Mr. Storm will have much chance, if I really make up my mind that I want him back."

She lazily took up a copy of an illustrated society journal and gazed at the reproduction of her portrait therein. "I'm prettier than I was last year, Meekie."

"Well you may be, with what you spend upon your idol. Yes, melody, you've made an idol of your own beauty, and fall down and worship it, and expect everybody else to do the same; but Mr. Storm won't, and so I'm telling you." With which parting shaft she disappeared and Hermia laid down her gold-tipped cigarette thoughtfully.

The curious impression produced upon her by that Eastertide at Courland Meynell had melted like butter in the sun as soon as she got to London.

Storm had installed her there, with Hart and Mrs. Brough to run the show and to ensure her not being troubled by a dishonest or insubordinate staff. He stayed a fortnight and then returned to Somersetshire, where the estate cried out for his presence. He pointed out to the girl who was spending his money that he must get through what had to be done at Cour-

land Meynell before going up to Romaldscar, where he wanted to get through his six months' residence before winter.

He came to London to see how she was getting on in May on his way north, but stayed only a day or two.

His conduct, when they met, never varied. He gave her, lavishly, all those things which she desired; but that which at first he had so eagerly proffered—his heart, his love—he now withheld completely.

As Lady Glen had foreseen, his detachment drew her on to think about him. She could not but be conscious of a certain contempt in his attitude towards her; and to her own surprise she was not willing that he should have a low opinion of her.

When she was dressed she grew restless. She sent down orders that nobody, not even Lady Merridew, was to be admitted. Then she had nothing to do, and wandered from room to room wistfully. He had said that he was coming by car, so that she could not go and meet him, and had no idea what time he would arrive.

In Eleanor's drawing-room she paced up and down much as—had she but known it—Eleanor herself had formerly paced, sick with love and longing for the same man. She paused before the fine oil portrait of Lady Flaunden, executed by order of her devoted husband just before their marriage. A splendid face, full of power and passion. As Hermia stood in reverie before it she heard a car stop at the door and, rushing to the front window, could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the Flaundens' large touring car, from

which emerged first his lordship, then Storm and lastly Eleanor, whom Ethan handed out carefully.

Lady Courland stared stupidly. The Flaundens! They were in South America! What was the meaning of this? In some trepidation she glanced about her, at the rearrangement of the room and the cushiony divans installed by herself and Prue. This was Eleanor's house—what would she think of it all?

Then, much to her relief, she saw that the Flaundens did not intend to come in. The man-servant went to the back of the car and unstrapped Storm's suitcase from the luggage there.

Leave-takings ensued, and Storm entered the house alone.

Hermia, who had intended to run downstairs to greet him, was somehow chilled, or put off, by the circumstance of the presence of those two others; yet her hesitation lasted only a minute. She left the drawing-room and was on the landing as he came upstairs. She held out both hands. "Oh, Ethan, I am so glad to see you!"

"Indeed? Very nice of you. I was afraid I should find you at Lord's or somewhere. One of my old form is batting in the Oxford eleven——"

She might have been his maiden aunt for all the emotion awakened in him by the meeting. Her eyes filled and she turned away, preceding him into the drawing-room with bent head.

"As it's so fine," he went on conversationally, "I think of going to watch the play for an hour or two myself this afternoon—Flaunden has given me tickets——"

She broke in. "Yes, Flaunden! I was so amazed to see them in London! I thought they were abroad."

"That's the difficulty," said Ethan, coming to a standstill before the portrait she had just been studying. "My word, that's a fine thing, isn't it!" said he thoughtfully. "I had forgotten it was so good. Just her expression. Must have cost him a pretty penny, but it was worth it."

"Yes, but Ethan! Do tell me how they come to be in England."

"Why, they had hardly landed at Monte Video when they got a wire to say that his mother, the Dowager, was dying. They decided they must come back at once—he's her only son—and so they did. The Dower House where she lives is in Yorkshire, not far from Romaldscar, and to my astonishment they appeared at the Castle a couple of days ago. The old lady has rallied for the moment, but they say it can't last. I put them up for a couple of nights——"

"How could you manage, when I have all the staff here?"

"We managed very well, thanks. Hart's understudy is quite a good lad, and of course Eleanor is at home there——"

"You must quite have enjoyed having them to yourself!"

"I did," he replied, missing the sarcasm; "but the point is—I promised to come up and find out how long you want to stay here. Eleanor felt sure that you would not be ready to turn out for at least another three weeks, if then——"

"Eleanor knows all about it, of course; or perhaps

she may not know me quite so intimately as it appears that she knows my home; however, she is mistaken for once. I can turn out and go back with you to Romaldscar to-morrow if you like."

Ethan gazed upon her with frank surprise. "There's not the slightest need for any sacrifice on your part, thanks. I have got this house till the end of July, and if you are amused and content——"

"I'm not. I want to be in the country. I want to be at Romaldscar. It is my home as well as Eleanor's—at least, I suppose it is."

He still regarded her with a puzzled frown.

"What will you do with yourself at Romaldscar?"

She laughed. "Plague you," she said, low and mischievously.

He turned upon her a look that seemed to her as hard as the granite of his native hills. "Will that give you pleasure?"

She struggled with mixed feelings. She knew that she had never looked more captivating than she did that summer morning; and in two or three off-hand phrases he had let her understand that such things were naught to him.

"Seriously, Ethan," she said at last, her voice not quite steady, "if you will not let me come home and take up my duties, you can hardly wonder if I try to amuse myself in other ways."

His eyes dwelt upon her with a very curious expression that seemed compounded of pity and scorn. His subjugation was not going to be so simple a thing as she had assumed.

"So be it," he said at last. "If such is really your

wish. I need hardly say that Eleanor had no idea at all of ousting you, she only wanted to know your dates within a few days. When would you like to go north?"

"To-morrow. Meakins and I can well start then, and leave the servants to pack up, clean and clear out, which I imagine they could do in a couple more days. Mrs. Brough will be pleased! She hates electric stoves and gas cookers, and yearns for the castle kitchen and a real roasting jack!"

She had made him smile, but it was only a grave one. "Well," he remarked, "so that's that. Now if you'll give me a mouthful of lunch, I think I'll go off to Lord's and see some play. I might be just in time for Mitchinson's innings. He was seventh in, I believe."

It was on her tongue to say that men only thought about cricket; but his retort would have been too easy and too obvious. Since Easter she had done nothing else at all but please herself. She rang the bell for lunch, ordered the car to drive him to Lord's, and in reply to his suggestion that she should accompany him, said that she must see to her packing.

When, after a hurried meal, he dashed off, he left her feeling rather as though she had been slapped in the face.

"Gone off by himself to look at that stupid cricket!" she cried indignantly to Meakins.

"Didn't he ask you to go with him?"

"Yes, but not a bit as if he wanted me—and besides! . . . Sitting there roasting in the sun and getting scorched in patches—it's not good enough."

Meakins shook her head silently.

"Anyway, I suppose he'll be at Romaldscar—he has to be there in fact—so he can't keep on getting out of my way!" cried the Countess passionately. "Why did he pretend to be so in love with me if he wasn't really? I believe he prefers his beloved Eleanor! Why didn't he marry her? I'm sure she'd have been willing enough!"

"Are you going to Romaldscar, then?"

"Yes. To-morrow! So just get packed as fast as you can, and be ready to start. Better send Hart out to engage a sleeping compartment, we shall have to go by the night train. Oh, who is that knocking? Come in, do!"

A footman appeared. Lady Merridew was on the telephone and insisted upon speaking to her ladyship herself. Could not give a message.

Flushed with annoyance at the interruption Hermia bade him connect her ladyship with her boudoir, and went off thither.

"I say, you are a pig, Hermia, letting us down like that this morning. I don't believe you were really ill—you were up to something else! Hugh Jenner is simply ramping!——"

"Let him ramp," came back a cold little voice.

"Well, but Hermia—what I really rang you up about is something quite different! Whom *do* you think I ran up against in Bond Street yesterday? If I gave you umpteen guesses you'd never get it! Nora Dinsmore! And she told me something so *extraordinary*—Oh, I can't trust the telephone with it, but I shall simply burst if I don't tell you—besides—you

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ought to hear! What are you doing this afternoon—can I come round?”

“Yes—do! Come round in half an hour! Then I can say good-bye to you. I’m going off up to the Castle to-morrow.”

“What—to Romaldscar?”

“Yes.”

“Then that settles it! You must hear what I have to tell you at once! It’s all about your husband!”

CHAPTER XXV

SETTLING IN

ALL the moors, from Brough to Barnard Castle, from High Cup Nick to Bowes, were shimmering in a haze of heat on the summer morning when Hermia returned to Romaldscar.

Storm had not travelled with her and her maid, but had set out some hours sooner to make the journey by road, as the car which the Countess liked best to use was in London and had to be driven up.

The staff were considerably disgruntled at this whim of their mistress to arrive in the morning, at short notice, and thus prevent any local demonstration of rejoicing. They were however somewhat soothed at being told that she had acted thus solely for the convenience of "Miss Eleanor" as Lady Flaunden was still called among them.

Mrs. Rogers, who had been cooking in Mrs. Brough's absence, was flustered and apologetic.

"Nothing as we should wish your ladyship to find it," she explained eagerly, "and we were not certain what accommodation your ladyship would prefer; but as you have arrived in such good time, perhaps you would be so kind as to walk round and see what there is. The best suite is the only one ready, but every-

thing is clean, and any rooms you might fix upon could be put in order by this evening."

Hermia stood in the fine hall, her eye travelling round its vaulted roof and carven gallery with a sudden leap of the heart. All night long had she lain sleepless in the rushing express, her brain humming with the tempest of conjecture which Prue Merridew's confidences had awakened.

At the time she had received the information with characteristic sangfroid.

"So that's the way they've hit upon to get a bit of their own back," she had remarked satirically. "Well now, Nora has asked for it, and she shall have it. I'm going to inform you, now this minute, the real reason why Ethan won't have Guy in the house; and if you like you may tell his wife. I don't care. It was because, when Guy had been married a week to Nora, he ran away from her, came to me, and asked me to go off with him. I didn't know he was married. Ethan came on the scenes just in time to stop me from smashing my whole life to bits. There! How's *that* for a tale?"

"Help!" cried Prue. "He was married—and you didn't know—and he came to ask you to bolt? Well I'm . . . !"

"Well you may be. That's the truth. You know they were married abroad, in a hole-and-corner sort of way; I knew he was engaged to her, but not that he was married. Do you wonder my husband doesn't love him a bit?"

Prue didn't. "Then," she went on thoughtfully,

"I don't expect there's any truth in all this scandal about Ethan either, is there?"

This bolt from the blue took Hermia's breath away. "*Scandal about Ethan?* They must be mad," she said contemptuously.

Prue explained, at some length. He was wildly in love with Lady Flaunden. She refused him because she found out that he kept a mistress; the lady in question now lived in the Keep, and visited him by way of the secret passage leading out into the Queen's Room.

The story bit deep into Hermia's emotions, for there were various trifling facts to make her suppose that it was founded on fact. Storm's deep feeling for Eleanor, his reverie before her portrait; the mysterious enclosure of the Keep, the fencing in of that part of the grounds, the appearance of Rogers from the secret passage.

The predominant feeling awakened by the story in her breast was a fierce, blazing jealousy, a determination to win Ethan from both these entanglements and to have him for her own.

She showed none of her feelings to Prue, deriding such stuff with dainty scorn as a stupid invention; but in her heart the knowledge throbbed and rankled. It should not take her long to ascertain the truth; and if there were anything in it, she would indeed have a trump card wherewith to counter, in the future, her husband's severe judgment of herself.

When Mrs. Rogers suggested that she would like to select her own apartments, she saw a way to push things to a speedy conclusion.

"I will come with pleasure," said she, "but I have already made my choice in my own mind. I want to sleep in the Queen's Room."

There was a silence, and Mrs. Rogers grew unmistakably red in the face.

"The Queen's Room? That's one of the State Apartments, melady. I couldn't let that be used, not without the master's permission."

"Oh, if that's all, we'll wait until he arrives—he ought soon to be here; and of course he will say I am to have any room I fancy."

"But perhaps in the meantime, melady, you could choose one for the present? The Queen's Room would take a lot of fitting up. You couldn't sleep in the great bed that's there now, it's not comfortable. There's a lovely room with a south aspect and an oriel, and it has a bath-room and sitting-room and all, if you'd be so kind as to take a look at it. I think it's what Mr. Storm thought you would prefer, and he had Mr. Benson last winter to fit it all up and choose the furniture."

"Melady," put in Meakins, "it's lovely. You come along and take a peep and you won't be wanting to use that dreary old place with the stones in the wall showing at the top above them old hangings and a lot of black oak that's as full of spiders as an egg of meat. You come along now and have your bath and a rest and you'll feel as different as anything."

Hermia had had experience of Benson as a fitter-up of pleasant chambers, and she went as desired, but with the remark that she quite intended to use the Queen's

Room and would have it arranged as soon as Mr. Storm could consider it.

The suite of rooms prepared for her were certainly delightful, and far more attractive than the mediæval gloom of the panelled chamber. For the present she submitted, and being bathed, fed and put to bed by Meakins, fell into a sound sleep from which she did not awaken until nearly tea-time.

The strains of the great organ in the hall floated up to her as she came out upon the gallery; and descending the main staircase, she saw Ethan seated, playing something which seemed to increase the sense of excitement which already animated her. She came downstairs at a run, in her airy summer frock which left her fair arms uncovered; and going straight up to where he was playing, she sat down upon the end of the long bench he occupied.

"Hallo!" said he; "let me finish this . . ."

"Of course. I like it. Go on."

He went on, his hands seeming to draw magic from the keyboard, until the last notes died away and she gave a long sigh. "What was that?"

"I expect you know it. Rachmaninoff's Prelude."

"A prelude—that's appropriate. It makes you feel all on tip-toe for what is to come after, which I suppose is what a prelude should do."

He turned his eyes upon her with a look of slight surprise. "You discern that?"

"I'm not altogether a fool, Ethan, although you think I am."

"That's nonsense," he said, with an air of haste as

if he wished to flee from the subject. "I hope you had a good journey?"

"A good journey but a bad night. I could not sleep in the train, which is why I am only just awake now. Stupid! I've been losing this beautiful day!"

"Come out now," he suggested, removing himself from her side rather as if the proximity were distasteful.

She consented at once and they went out, through the widely-opened garden doors at the back, which gave upon the terrace. "I told Hart to bring tea out here," he said—"Ah, I see it's ready! Come along."

"I'm just longing for a cup of tea! And how odd, and also pleasant! I shall pour out yours for the first time."

He ignored this approach to sentimentality.

"You have seen your rooms? Do you like them?" he presently asked.

"Yes, they are charming; but I feel a bit disappointed. I hoped I might have used the Queen's Room."

He laughed, quite composedly. "Oh, please don't do that. We have quite a fair number of visitors each summer, to inspect our 'State Apartments,' and their money pretty well keeps our Cottage Hospital going. If you take away our show piece we shall be much diminished; and you know that room's beastly uncomfortable."

"Colonel Brice used it?"

"Yes. A whim of his; but even he owned that it was a dismal place."

"Well, then, what about the Keep? My rooms are too modern!"

"Oh, come! Charles II!"

"Are they? But they don't look it. I want a turret bower, out of which a lady could look down upon her knight riding to war."

"Sorry, but the Keep rooms are not available. Colonel Brice bequeathed them to Rogers, and by the terms of his will I can't turn them out. But there is a room in the tower at the other end which I think you might like. When we have had tea I will take you to look at it."

"I should like you to show me everything, as you did at Courland Meynell."

He laughed. "We bored you stiff between us, Frank and I."

"Nothing of the kind! I liked being there and I am glad I did not sell it; but I believe I like Romaldscar better. I don't think I shall be dull here."

"Wait till you have tried. There isn't a soul in any of the shooting-boxes yet. However, what folks there are will soon come and call upon you." After a pause he added, "Please remember, as soon as you feel you can't bear it, let me know, and you can move on. Because I am tied here for half the year, you need not be."

"You seem quite set upon turning me out—you didn't want me to come at all," she said resentfully. "However, you will have to put up with me for a while. The place attracts me. Do you remember when first I came here, Rogers promised to show me a bloodstain on the stair?"

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"To be sure. That's the main thing the tourists pay to see."

"I'm as full of vulgar curiosity as they are."

He gave her an odd look; and to herself she thought, "There is something in it. I'm certain there is. Now what?"

At the moment a servant approached to know if the head gardener could speak to Mr. Storm for a moment; and Storm, having drunk his tea, made her a slight apology, rose and went away. For a few minutes she sat on there, pondering over Ethan's odd demeanour. "But he was in love with me last year," she told herself, half puzzled, half indignant.

She was keenly scanning the hard, rough exterior of the Keep when she saw Rogers approaching, and greeted him with a friendliness which evidently gave him pleasure.

"Is the master about, melady?"

"Somewhere in the garden, I think. The head gardener had something to say to him. Did you want him?"

"Rather urgently, melady."

"Can you give me your message? I'll go and find him."

"Oh no, melady, thank you; I'll go and find him myself."

"I can show you which way he went," said Hermia, rising, "and we can go together. I want to talk to you, Rogers, about the history of this place. I want to see the bloodstain on the stair, and I want you and Mrs. Rogers to show me your rooms in the Keep—won't you? Because they are so very ancient."

"Oh, melady, there's nothing to see in our rooms.

They were only made habitable about a hundred years ago," muttered the man hastily. "Begging your pardon, melady, we don't show them. They was left to us by the late Colonel and even Mr. Storm, he don't interfere."

"Well, of course, I don't want to pry! But I thought I should be an exception."

"Well, melady, if you're so set upon it, I'll consult Mrs. Rogers," murmured the man uncomfortably, "but she would want notice, having been busy down in the castle kitchen lately. Have you seen the castle kitchen yet, melady? Ah, that is worth seeing, that is."

"All right, I'll go there first," said Hermia rather defiantly.

As she spoke, Ethan came towards them, and Rogers with a muttered excuse left her and ambled off so fast that she could not catch him up without running. She saw that he said something to his master in an undertone and Storm at once turned and walked rapidly with him away from Hermia and out of ear-shot.

For a moment she hesitated, then ran after them, calling her husband by name. He paused and faced about, evidently not best pleased to be interrupted.

"Ethan, I want to go over the castle, and may Rogers show me the bloodstain?"

"I'm afraid not at this moment," was the reply; gentle enough but quite firm. "Rogers has an errand to go—an urgent one. Please wait until to-morrow."

She bit her lip. "It seems a pity I came. Since I may not use the rooms I like and may not go round

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the castle either, perhaps I had better go to bed."

"Oh, don't do that," he replied, quite unmoved by her obvious vexation. "Order the car and have a spin. The moors are looking lovely."

"If you will come, too," she shot out. He hesitated. It almost looked as though he overcame distaste. "If you will wait half an hour, I will," he replied unemotionally.

CHAPTER XXVI

BLUEBEARD'S CHAMBER

THE car was ordered and Hermia made ready. Meakins, as she dressed her, remarked that she thought it inconsiderate to ask a man who had already that day travelled two hundred and fifty miles by car to go out again the same evening.

In reply, her head was bitten off. Furiously the countess asked if there was any one thing she might do in this hateful place without being called over the coals for it, and so flounced out of the room, darted along a corridor, hastened round several corners, and after a few minutes stopped short with the knowledge that she had come the wrong way and did not know where she was.

The sunshine poured in through mullioned windows on one side of the panelled passage, showing up the warm brown gloom, lit from time to time by bow-fronted chests of tulip-wood and lacquer cabinets. She remembered coming along that corridor last year. If she was right, the Queen's Room was just ahead of her—and its door was ajar.

She listened. Nothing stirred in that part of the house. All was silence and solitude. She pushed open the door and peeped in. She was right. The Queen's Room it was, and the sun glinted through the pierced

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hearts in the coloured window as it had done on a previous occasion.

Standing in the window, she fell into a reverie, recalling her hopes then and her hopes now. She knew that for some reason she was utterly unable to explain she had fallen in love with Ethan and, equally incredibly, he had fallen out of love with her. In that room, nine months ago, she had said him nay. Now . . . to her annoyance her eyes filled with tears. She was at his mercy and he scorned her.

Slowly she paced the length of the room, past the place where was the secret door and up the other side. Her eye fell upon a panel which was pierced with holes, in the pattern of a star, at about the height of a man's eyes.

Scrutinizing it more closely, she noted a wooden button, such as fastens a cupboard door. Instantly she opened it and a cupboard it proved to be. There was nothing in it but a rod fixed across, from which depended an array of coat-hangers. Just as she was peering attentively in, she heard a sound—approaching footsteps and voices. She did not want to be found in that room! A second's listening told her that these noises reached her not from the corridor but from the secret passage. She was a long way from the door of the room—could certainly be seen in flight—in a moment she had slipped into the cupboard, drawn the door closed after her and was peering through the pierced carving.

The door was opened. A woman came out into the room. She was young and handsome and well, although rather oddly, dressed. Her face was harassed

and discontented and she turned impatiently to Ethan, who followed her.

"It depends on what he says," Ethan was saying as he emerged from the passage. "We must be guided by that. I shall come across to-night and hear."

"What time?" she asked moodily.

"It depends upon what time her ladyship goes to bed. As soon as I can."

She flung out her hands in a gesture which had something foreign in it. "Oh, I am so sick of it all! So weary! First hope, then disappointment! Time after time! How long is it to last? I tell you I can't stand much more. One of these days I shall throw myself out of the window!"

"Oh no you won't!" The man's tone was cynical. "You are too clever a woman for that. You never know what the future has in store. Hasn't Marnie prophesied a change soon?"

The girl made no reply, but turned away and seemed to dry her eyes with a handkerchief. Ethan looked half ashamed, and patted her shoulder as if consoling her, the while he urged her backward through the door. He added a few words which the listener heard plainly.

"I must insist upon more care now that the house is no longer empty. I forbid you to come through this passage again, under any pretext. Understand, it is an order."

So saying, he closed the door upon her, hastily crossed the floor and went out into the corridor. Hermia, in her hiding-place, waited until all sound had utterly died away and then slipped out and ran

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fleety along the passages until, turning a corner, she encountered a housemaid.

"I've lost my way! In my own house!" she gasped laughingly. "Please show me the way downstairs; I think Mr. Storm is waiting for me!"

He was in the hall, and he thought his wife had never looked so tantalizingly adorable as she did as she descended the stair gaily describing her wanderings in the passages. She took her place by him with the utmost calmness, as though they drove together every afternoon, and, turning to him, said almost insolently:

"Well, here is one last petition. I have been refused so many that I ask with misgivings. Take me to see your model cottages in Lancekirk. I want to know what the ones at Courland will look like when they are done."

"By all means. But these are very different. Stone, you know, is our building material hereabouts. But down there we use red brick or rough-cast——"

It was a good, safe topic. They talked estate development and such things until they reached the hamlet; and all the way Hermia was seething with emotions she could barely hold in check. She longed to turn upon the impassive man at her side and demand to know what he wanted with her, and why he had been so keen to marry her, and what it all meant!

He had good taste! The secret girl was a beauty! And he was going to her that night! Had made an assignation with her, which depended upon the hour at which her ladyship retired!

She made up her mind that, before her ladyship

retired, she would have an explanation of the whole matter.

There he sat, calm and almost listless, his fine profile turned to her, his eyes resting upon the summer beauty of the country through which they glided so smoothly.

It was like a horrible nightmare. When Guy failed her she had believed that this man was a tower of strength and truth. And now he turned out to be something so cynical, so detestably false and insulting and contemptible—that at the bottom of her heart she hardly believed her suspicions could be true.

No Frank Benson was present that night to make a third at their dinner table and keep the conversation impersonal. They sat facing one another, she eager and fitful, he abstracted and apparently depressed. Evidently he had not in the least expected her to come to Romaldscar, did not want her there, did not know what to do with her now that she had arrived.

He took coffee with her in the small drawing-room after dinner, then, after pacing once to the window and back, turned to her apologetically. "You know what I am—how unsatisfactory socially. I have promised the schoolmaster to set his accounts right for him this evening—cricket club and so on. I fear I shan't have done before half-past ten. Please don't wait up for me."

She was sitting when he spoke, but his words drew her to her feet. She had suddenly the sensation that this was unbearable—that she must do something to put an end to his armed neutrality.

"Ethan—tell me!" Her words surprised herself.

"You mean this to go on—this life of estrangement—always?"

He had been walking towards the door, but as she spoke he stopped short, slowly turned, took a deep breath and steadily faced the outraged, quivering beauty who stood there inviting him.

"So far," said he gravely, "I can think of no alternative. Can you?"

Personality is a strange thing. There seemed nothing in his words nor in his demeanour to account for the sudden fear in her. His eye had swept her from head to foot—but in condemnation, not admiration. She was judged; found wanting; set aside.

The torrent of words sank back in her throat. She could neither protest nor cry. He had passed on and left the room before she could gather herself together to hurl at him the obvious retort concerning those who live in glass houses.

He had thrown a stone and she felt as if it had struck her on the forehead as David's struck Goliath. The result was curious. She felt that nothing mattered—nothing in the world—but that Ethan Storm should be brought to her feet. He might have half a dozen secret ladies in the Keep, but his love and his allegiance should be for his wife alone.

Here they were, husband and wife, in the same house, in a lonely spot. Not a guest would she summon, in no one would she confide; but she alone would lay siege to the citadel of that man's locked heart, nor desist until she had rushed in and possessed it wholly and solely.

She knew herself capable of infinite patience, infinite

craft in the carrying out of her design. He had loved her. Her conduct on the wedding day had, as he thought, killed that love. She knew better. Somewhere in him was smouldering a fire that would break out one day in the crashing of the Thunderstorm. She would conquer him, if it took months!

That night, after Meakins had left her, she crept from bed and ascertained that Ethan went to the Queen's Room. She determined to remain awake until his return, but at half-past three her healthy girlhood imperatively demanded slumber, so she only knew that he had not come back by then.

As she remained upstairs to breakfast next morning, they did not meet. At lunch-time she came in from a ride and ate with her hat on, the while she informed Ethan that she had been trying the horses in the stable and, though they were not much of a lot, she thought she had found one that suited her and intended to ride regularly. He made his usual empty expressions of consent, professed himself glad to hear that she had found something she liked, offered to sell one or two of the horses and buy her a good one if she wished, which offer she refused with a slight smile and a shake of the head; and they parted, after smoking a cigarette together in the hall, Ethan wondering how long it would take her to decide that she could not stop an hour longer in the place.

That afternoon she ordered the car, drove to Lancekirk and interviewed Mrs. Marston, the vicar's wife. She said she was going to remain at Romaldscar for at least three months and wanted to do something to help. She dared not offer to teach, being

herself far too ignorant; but she would like to do the altar flowers, supplying the blooms from the castle; and she would like, if it would be acceptable, to have a mothers' meeting or a working-party up there; and what about summer treats? The weather seemed so fine . . . but probably Mr. Storm would have thought of all that?

Mrs. Marston laughed a little nervously as she gratefully accepted the countess's suggestions. She owned that the vicar and Mr. Storm had been on the point of arranging to hold the treats up in the park the following week; but when it was known that Lady Courland was coming, Mr. Storm had sent down word that he thought they had better go elsewhere and had suggested Barnard Castle and the Bowes Museum.

Hermia coloured a little as she smiled. "I was a frivolous kind of chit when I married Mr. Storm," avowed she; "but I hope to improve now. Tell me—which would be the greater treat to your folks, the park here, or Barnard Castle?"

"Well—to tell you the truth, they prefer Romald-scar. They never could go there in the Colonel's day, he was so nervous and solitary. Very good about sending my husband a cheque to take them elsewhere, but they like the old historic parts and those he would not let them see."

"Then of course they must come," cried Hermia, "and you and I will fix dates."

Mrs. Marston expressed her thanks with considerable warmth and went on to sing the praises of Mr. Storm.

"If all landlords were like him we should have but

little socialism," said she vaguely. "Everyone has work, and everyone who works on the estate in any capacity has a right to a cottage and they pay no more rent than they did for the old ones. He dismissed Colonel Brice's agent and has the present man well under his own eye. Oh, there have been changes since he came!"

"And he's doing the same thing on my own lands down in the south of England. He seems to know just what to do and how to do it."

"Yes, the vicar says he has the most powerful mind of any man with whom he has been in personal contact. He says he feels as though he ought to be Archbishop or Prime Minister, he has such wonderful powers of organisation as well as intellect."

"He makes me feel dreadfully small," said Hermia with a meekness which anyone who knew her might have found suspicious. Mrs. Marston heartily accepted it at its face value, and this astonishing young peeress went on to suggest that Mrs. Marston, living in such a remote spot, must sometimes want to go to Darlington or some other shopping centre and that she would be delighted to take her thither. This was quite overwhelming. There came an outpouring in return and Hermia learnt how impossible it was to keep house and clothe the children economically when you could never get to the shops. It was arranged that she should call for her new friend the following day at half-past ten, drive to Darlington, shop, lunch and return at leisure. Another day they might go to Harrogate or Ripon. As she drove back she felt herself glowing with what was to her an absolutely new sensa-

tion—that of having given pleasure to another.

She said no word of her day's activities to Ethan on her return. Apparently he thought that the question and answer which had passed between them the previous night had decided the whole matter of their relations to each other, for that night he left her without apology—with the mere statement that he wanted to practise; and she sat reading a novel to the accompaniment of the rolling organ and the majesty of Bach.

She knew, however, that her husband went that night again to the Keep; also that he returned about a quarter past two. But on no succeeding night did he go thither to the best of her knowledge, although it grew to be a habit with her to listen for the sound of his door.

CHAPTER XXVII

HERMIA REFORMING HERSELF

ON the third morning of her stay her ladyship came down to breakfast, surprising Ethan with a company of dogs around him, which he hurriedly ordered Hart to remove. She did not tell him of her invitation to Mrs. Marston, but said she was going to Darlington and could execute any commissions he might have.

In some surprise he owned that there were various things he would like seen to; and when she came downstairs equipped for the drive he was in the hall and had quite a long list written down with scrupulous exactitude for her guidance.

She gave her mind seriously to such matters as valves, lead piping, cattle feed, screws, wall nails and wire netting. She had plenty of sense and was determined to use it. He should see that he had by no means married an ornamental fool.

She quite enjoyed that day. Ursula Marston was an Oxford graduate, who, as a poor parson's wife, found herself cut off from most of her own interests in life. In her girlhood she had travelled a good deal, Bohemian fashion, tramping the less known regions of France, Spain and Italy with girl friends, and she knew many of the places where Hermia and her father

had been. She had also a fund of high spirits, somewhat damped by solitude and the care of three small children on inadequate means. A well cooked lunch at an hotel and "The Thief of Bagdad" on the films gave her keen pleasure, and Hermia found that she herself was entertained in an unaccustomed way. She listened to the usual praise of her husband, of whom Ursula spoke in terms of almost worshipping admiration. She wondered what her new friend would think if she knew that her idol slipped away in the night to visit the attractive lady whom he kept concealed in the secret portions of his fortress.

It was past seven in the evening when Romaldscar was reached and Ethan was in the hall, almost as though he had been awaiting his wife's return.

She produced a carefully checked list, upon which each item had been crossed off as dealt with and notes made overleaf on such points as had arisen.

Hermia went over these notes carefully and was rewarded by a curious, questioning look, the first of the kind that he had ever given her. "It's really very good of you to take all this trouble," he said gratefully. "Moreover, I hear that you took Mrs. Marston into Darlington with you and gave her a day of it. That's the sort of thing that doesn't occur to the mere man, but it was a happy thought of yours."

"I like her. She's quite a good sort," said Hermia, waving aside thanks. "May I ask them to dinner?"

"Of course. As soon as you like. Marston ought to have a more important job than a village like this. He's really thrown away here."

"Forgive my asking, but—if you can raise the work-

men's wages and build them houses and so on—why can't you raise their stipend? It seems a miserable pittance."

He looked serious. "I'll tell you. It is because I feel that if I do it I ought to put down the capital to produce the increase. I could give them a yearly allowance out of my pocket, but, then, quite likely my successor couldn't or wouldn't continue it, and it wouldn't be fair. As a fact I meant to put down a couple of thousand this year, but with Courland Meynell to consider I couldn't manage it."

She stood considering this, her eyes thoughtful. "Then if I had not demanded a town house and separate establishment, Ursula Marston might have enough money to engage a nursery governess for her children." She sighed, turning away towards the stairs. "There are so many things . . . and people . . . that I have never given a thought to," she remarked as she went slowly upward.

The following fortnight was a busy one. First, the "Mothers" arrived for their working party, for which purpose Hermia had rearranged that room in which Eleanor used to do the flowers for the house. The new lady of the manor made the discovery of the difference which exists between the cottager of Victorian fiction and the shrewd, hard, eager and capable north-country women of to-day. She herself worked with them, took her turn in the reading aloud and helped pour out tea. Guided by the sage advice of Mrs. Brough, she ordered a real north-country tea with six kinds of hot tea-cake, pastries, ham, jam and so on—and only one plate of "cold bread-and-butter"!

She was in actual fact so ignorant of all the things they knew that they soon saw that she really asked questions in order to obtain information and not from curiosity nor condescension. This being ascertained, she was overwhelmed with floods of advice on the subject of poultry, flower gardening, baking, brewing, dressmaking and the nurture of infants. Upon this last topic they felt sure they must be on the right ground with her, and "when his little lordship comes along" was the burden of their talk.

When they had gone she was tired to death, but not in the least bored. She told Ursula she had never had a more stimulating experience.

Then came the treats, and for three days the park and certain parts of the castle were given up to them. The children one day, the parents the next, the infants last. This was succeeded by a huge scout rally in which the Balderston Scouts, of whom Ethan was Colonel, and troops from various towns and villages in the neighbourhood took part.

This was a larger occasion and the county came to lunch to meet the Brigadier-General who had been roped in to hold an inspection.

Hermia played her part admirably. She looked exquisite, flitted about from place to place, made friends with the surrounding gentry and was greatly admired. Ethan received warm congratulations on all hands.

As she turned from the doorway where she had taken leave of the last guest, her husband turned with her and they moved together towards the stairs.

"I'm afraid you must be very tired," he remarked.

"That doesn't matter a bit, if the thing was a success," she answered; "and I think it was?"

"It certainly was, and I am indebted to you," he answered gravely. Then, with a sudden laugh, oddly unexpected, "How long do you think you'll be able to keep it up, Hermia?"

"To keep it up?"

"Your new rôle—Lady Bountiful."

"But it's not a new rôle—it's my life, Ethan. There's no question of keeping it up. Only a question of learning my job." She paused a moment at the stairs foot. "It's perhaps harder for me to learn because of being—conspicuously ignorant," said she in a low tone, "and also because of having—nobody to help me. But I mean to do it—somehow . . . jooty, you know."

There was a fugitive smile and before the man could recover from his confusion she had slipped away up the stairs to her room; whence she presently sent word that she would not be coming down to dinner that night.

Ethan sat alone and pondered the problem that confronted him.

It almost looked as though the girl were in earnest—as though she had decided to buckle to and accept her destiny as his wife. If he still held aloof, still maintained the distance between them—left her as she had just said, "with no one to help her"—what could he expect?

There would be a violent reaction. Catastrophic. She would run away . . . and he would be responsible. Yet, as he saw things, there was nothing that

he could do. For hours he sat, his head in his hands, thinking—thinking.

Next morning gave a turn to the kaleidoscope. Hermia received a letter from Eleanor, begging hospitality at the castle for herself and Flaunden, for an unspecified time. Netherwell Dower House, where his mother lived, and wherein she was slowly dying, was within motoring distance of Romaldscar. It was a small house, with no more than a couple of guest-rooms and was over-filled with nurses and a widowed daughter and a niece. Eleanor said they would not be troublesome visitors as they would spend most of the day at Netherwell; and they expected that all would be over before the time for the shooting house-party.

Hermia, having read her letter, read it a second time aloud to Ethan, watching his face light up with pleasure at the thought of having Eleanor in the house.

"Someone to take his mind off me," she thought darkly. "But no matter. I planted a little thorn last night and he has been thinking about it, though he won't say so. He'll have to give way one day; but I wish I knew exactly where the shoe pinches." Aloud she said, "It will be very nice to have Eleanor here and get to know her better. She writes charmingly about my handing over the Brownlow Street house at a minute's notice; but I was sick of town and I like being here better, so there is not much to plume myself upon."

Ethan sat regarding her with that odd look which now she had seen several times upon his face, "as if,"

she told herself, "he was wondering whether I am perhaps not quite so depraved as he believes." Had she known how very near to the truth this was she would have felt surprised.

He seemed to hesitate, and the earnest wish that she might grow to know Eleanor better, which she had confidently expected to hear from him, was not uttered. "Perhaps he thinks I'm not a fit friend for his Eleanor," thought she; and again her conjecture was horribly near the mark.

She hastened off as soon as she had finished eating, to consult Mrs. Brough, send telegrams and give orders for Lady Flaunden to have the sitting-room she had used in her unmarried days and the rooms adjoining. She made elaborate arrangements for her guests' comfort, and by the time they arrived, about six o'clock, all was in order and looked charming.

Eleanor felt touched by Hermia's obvious anxiety that she should have everything as she liked it. She reproached herself a little for her contemptuous estimate of Ethan's wife. By the end of the evening she was feeling a little bewildered; for it really looked as though the devotion were on Hermia's side, the indifference on the husband's.

His coldness and stand-off manner were noticeable and were invariably met by a kind of meek courtesy on his wife's part. Eleanor thought ruefully that she must have been more right than she knew. It had been the man's senses only that were caught in the snare of Lady Courland's beauty; and now that he had slaked his passion there was nothing left. It was a hateful idea, but it seemed to her manifest that he

kept his wife at a distance and gave her very little of his company.

And how lovely she was! Far lovelier than she had been the preceding year, when she had rejected him and broken his heart. What divided them? It could not be the fact that she had married him only because she could not get Dinsmore; since he was well aware of that all the time. A hazy guess floated through Eleanor's mind, and the first time she found herself alone with Ethan she put it into words.

They were in the garden after dinner and Hermia, who played billiards remarkably well, was in the billiard-room with Flaunden.

"Ethan," said Eleanor, "there is something I would like to say to you. Do you remember, last year, that night I asked Hermia to dinner to meet you, you begged my leave to take your wife, when you had one, into your confidence, and I refused to hear of it?"

"I remember very well."

"It has struck me that I was wrong. A wife who loved you would inevitably be deeply hurt if she had an inkling of such a state of things. And it seems to me that Hermia is developing into a model wife. I am very glad of it, for your sake, dear; and I want to tell you that I remove my restriction. I release you from your oath where she is concerned. You may tell her at your discretion."

"Thanks very much," he replied, after a minute's silence, "but I don't think I am at all likely to take advantage of your generous permission. You were right and I was wrong. It is better to leave things exactly as they are."

"But, Ethan—are you sure of that? Might she not find out something and then very reasonably resent your having withheld——"

His lip curled. "No. I don't think she could reasonably resent my having withheld—anything! But I feel sure the question will not arise. By the by—have you been over there yet?"

A jerk of his head towards the Keep Tower filled out the question.

"Yes. I went yesterday. It's frightfully distressing. But the doctor says it may go on for years."

"I think the doctor is right; and the secret is now known to quite enough people. Myself, the Rogers, the doctor, you—and what about Flaunden?"

"Oh, I haven't told him!"

"Indeed? Well, I won't deny that I'm glad to hear it. I am sure you are wise; and I intend to continue to follow your example."

"By the way," she said, after a silence, "have you and Hermia heard the latest scandal? Mr. and Mrs. Guy Dinsmore have separated."

Ethan raised his head suddenly, shooting a keen glance at her. "Indeed?"

"Yes. I feel sorry for Nora. Guy never cared for her. It was always much more on her side than on his; and she might have married that nice Hawthorne who was really in love, I believe! But when a woman's as rich as she is—is any man disinterested?"

"Have they merely quarrelled, or is there—er—anything legal?" asked Storm, speaking as one who tries to hide a keen curiosity.

"I heard that she was going to divorce him."

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For a moment a sickening flash of apprehension shook Ethan. Then he was calm again. "Has she grounds for the—er—extreme course?" he asked.

"How should I know? They were never in my set. But he won't let it come to that, you may depend. He is a gentleman of expensive habits, and he'll make her forgive him, whatever he has done."

"I wonder!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

WORSE AND WORSE

NEXT morning, after breakfast, as Ethan was in his library hard at work, there came a knock at the door; and upon his "Come in!" his wife entered, not without embarrassment.

"I did not mean to disturb you; I thought you had gone out," she carefully explained. "I came to look at Mudie's catalogue. I am giving the parish library some new books, and Ursula suggested that Mudie sells off some of the best, quite cheap."

He rose at once and found what she wanted. Then, as she prepared to withdraw, he said abruptly, "Will you wait a moment? I should like a word with you"

"Certainly." She coloured, as he was quick to note, but she betrayed no reluctance. It was he who hesitated.

"I suppose you hear sometimes from your London friends?" he asked tentatively.

"I hear from Prue—Prue Merridew—pretty often," she replied, vaguely surprised.

"Then you probably already know the news which Eleanor told me yesterday—that the Dinsmores have separated?"

She gave a slight laugh of derision. "Oh, yes—I

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heard that a week ago. I was not surprised. As a matter of fact I think it was my doing."

Anger leapt into his voice. "*Your doing?*"

"Yes. Do you care to know what happened?"

"If you please."

"Prue met Nora one day in Bond Street and Nora proceeded to tell her all sorts of abominable things about you."

"About *me?*"

"It appears that Guy had told Nora that the reason for your attitude to him is that when he hastened to my rescue after Uncle Joe's death he found that you were putting unfair pressure on me; that he thereupon told you what he thought of you, and so incurred your lasting enmity."

"Indeed? What kind of pressure did he suggest?"
There was keen anxiety underlying the question.

"Oh—financial! But that was not all. He has a fine story about a secret scandal in your life. It appears that you were madly in love with Eleanor and that she refused you because she had discovered the double life you were leading; but that she kept silence about it because she knew that if Colonel Brice found out he would not leave you his fortune."

"Pretty good, that! . . . Do you believe it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't suppose it makes any difference to you what I believe; but I thought it better that Nora's mouth should be shut, so I told Prue a few things I thought Nora ought to know——"

"Such as——"

"That it was absolutely untrue that either Uncle

Joe or I owed you money, or that you lent me any. I informed her that, so far from putting pressure on me, you ascertained, on going into my affairs, that I was entitled to a sum of money of which I knew nothing; and that I paid all expenses at Dieppe out of my own resources."

He was silent for a space, reflecting upon the extraordinary difficulty of seeing into a woman's mind. "And you think Prue would tell Mrs. Dinsmore all this?"

"Certainly. I told her more than that—how Guy deserted Nora a week after marriage, and came to try and persuade me to go off with him—came without telling me that he was married! That is what has done it, I expect."

He fired a sudden question. "Have you heard from Dinsmore since their rupture?"

Raising her eyes to his, she looked him steadily in the face. From those eyes the mocking imp had completely vanished. "A letter arrived here for me from him the day before yesterday. I did not open it. I enclosed it in an envelope and returned it to him, addressed to his club."

There was a pause. Ethan seemed to find this reply so surprising as to require reflection.

"Thank you," he muttered presently; and after further hesitation: "Forgive this inquisition—there is method underlying it—I want to know if you have been told whether the separation between him and his wife is permanent, or legal, or—likely to become so?"

"I have no idea. But I should hardly think Guy would be so imprudent as to allow it to come to that."

Storm brought down a clenched fist on his blotter. "If he is legally free I'll make him marry you!" he growled.

Hermia, who had been seated, rose to her feet, white as ashes.

"You would make—Guy—marry me," she almost whispered; "you must be mad! I am your wife . . ." She could not go on.

"My wife in law," he rejoined, broodingly, his brow knit, his eyes lowered. "That could be got over."

Anger restored her voice.

"Thank you for letting me know the position so unmistakably. I have been blind enough not to realise how anxious you are to be rid of me; but you can't do it in the way you suggest, because no power on earth could make me marry Guy. You must think of some other plan. . . . Have you any further questions to put?"

In silence she waited while he pushed about the papers under his hand—tried to speak, finally shook his head. He muttered something that sounded like "I give it up" as she swept in outraged dignity out of the room.

* * * *

Late that afternoon, when the sun was sinking behind the purple fells and the garden was bathed in red sunshine, Eleanor, who had not that day accompanied Flaunden to Netherwell, came upon the Countess sitting alone with a book on her lap which she was not reading, upon a marble seat among the roses.

Something in the pose of the solitary girl was so pathetic that a pang darted through Eleanor's heart.

She walked quickly to the place, sank down upon the seat beside her, wound her arm about her and, laying down her dark head upon her shoulder, said softly:

"Love me a little, Hermia—do you think you could?"

Hermia started, but did not repulse her. She sat very still, almost as if afraid that Eleanor might draw off.

"I could—but I don't," she presently rejoined; and Eleanor, gazing keenly at her, saw that she had been weeping, so long or so bitterly as to leave her lids swollen and her cheeks blotchy.

"Hermia, shall I tell you something about myself?" she went on, ever so softly, ever so caressingly—she had grown softer since her marriage. "I thought I would never be able to bear to tell anyone, but somehow I would like to tell you if you wouldn't be bored."

"Bored? I'd be thankful for almost anybody's society; I'm alone every day—always!"

"My dear!" For a moment Eleanor was silenced by the naked pain in the voice.

"Why do you stay here?" she suggested uncomfortably. "Couldn't you go somewhere that would be gayer?"

"I am less miserable here than I should be anywhere else," said Hermia, "but that doesn't matter—you said you would tell me something about yourself. I want to hear it—you don't know how much I want to hear it."

Eleanor wavered. It was on her tongue to cry out, "What is wrong between you and Ethan?" but she knew instinctively that it was not yet the moment for

that. She determined to go on with what she had to say, in the forlorn hope that it might comfort Hermia a little.

"It's possible somebody may have hinted something of it to you already. People are always so eager to talk about a woman who loves without requital. All my life, ever since I was about fifteen, I've been hopelessly in love with your husband, Hermia!"

"You? In love with him?" swiftly. "They said he was in love with you and you wouldn't have him."

"Hopelessly wide of the mark, my dear. He never cared a straw for me in that way. I was so fond of him that I went on year after year deluding myself. I said he was poor and that if he were rich he would speak. I went on hugging my delusion because I didn't dare to think what would happen if I lost it. Down in my heart I knew it was delusion, but I would not give up, until—until he saw you."

"Saw me?"

"Yes. He came to me one day, in Brownlow Street, with a new look on his face—a changed man; and he said, 'Eleanor, I've seen a girl—and if it's humanly possible I mean to marry her. I've never fallen in love before in my life, and now it's for ever.' . . . Well, what could I do? Thank God I was able to say I was glad. I was able to promise that I would ask you to dinner and that he should sit next you. Then he went away and left me with my life all smashed to bits, empty, useless. . . . Oh, Hermia, if you could know what it was for me last year to see you and him together! I did not think you cared a rap for him, I thought you were going to break his

heart—and I was starving, craving, for just one of the looks he gave you! . . . Are you a wee bit sorry for me, or do you just despise me?"

Hermia did not answer. Her lip quivered and she was evidently afraid to trust her voice. She laid her hand upon Eleanor's—the first approach she had ever made to her.

"Walter had been in love with me for two years or more—ever since we met," went on Eleanor. "But I could not ever pause to think about him, I was so absorbed in loving Ethan. But when I heard that you were married I gave myself a serious talking to. 'Eleanor,' I said, 'you have spent enough years loving a man who never thought of you. You had better buck up now and marry a man who really needs you. Then you will be of some use in the world.' I don't believe in a woman letting herself go sour, as I call it! So I told Walter I would marry him, and to my surprise I am absurdly happy with him. I love him dearly and we suit each other so well! . . . And for the past six weeks I've had the most beautiful secret—I'm going to have a child! Oh, its so *wonderful*, Hermia—you simply can't think how wonderful!"

Hermia trembled. She thought of Prue Merri-dew's view of maternity and compared it with Eleanor's. The discovery that Lady Flaunden, whom she thought of as so completely a woman of the world, was just a happy, simple wife and mother was amazing. The tears which had flowed already that day brimmed up again. She leaned against Eleanor and clung to her, while they murmured together an ex-

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change of broken words which assured Eleanor of her complete sympathy.

It seemed to the older woman, keenly eager to know what it was that was wrong with the Storm-Courland marriage, as if the next moment would have produced a confidence and Hermia have laid bare the cause for the estrangement which both the Flaundens were certain existed.

It was perhaps unfortunate that at the psychological instant her own husband, absent all day, came hastening through the garden in search of her; and Lady Courland almost instantly slipped away, eager to hide her tell-tale eyelids.

An unwonted thing happened that evening. Storm was a full ten minutes late for dinner, and came in looking as though he had thrown his clothes upon him in unseemly haste.

Hermia said nothing whatever to him. Up to that day she had done her best to preserve appearances before the visitors, and had peppered a little small talk over the insipid cold meat of their married—or rather their divided life. To-night, however, she seemed to have gone past caring what anybody thought and did not even reply to the apology Ethan offered her.

"Well, I suppose we had better go in at once," she said, taking Flaunden's arm; "you must be starving after your long drive."

Once or twice during dinner Eleanor, keenly on the alert, detected Ethan's eyes upon his wife with an expression she could not read, but his manner was that of a man obsessed with some vast preoccupation. He

looked worn and worried; and in the course of the meal took occasion to say that he should have to be away the whole of the next day on important and unforeseen business, the nature of which he did not specify.

When they rose from table he made a hurried request to be excused, as a man was waiting to see him and he might have to go out with him.

"You shouldn't let him time his business appointments so badly, Lady Courland," said Flaunden, half jesting. "Surely he might keep his evenings free!"

"I'm very sorry"—almost for the first time Hermia saw Ethan confused and looking frankly as though he disliked to have his movements commented upon—"I'll try and arrange better, but this evening it is urgent—I really must go."

As he left the room he flashed a look at Hermia—almost a look of appeal. As it happened she was looking at him, puzzled by his manner, and she caught the glance—quite unlike his usual cold correctness. "Don't wait up for me, I may be very late," he said, addressing her directly; and then turned scarlet and bolted.

"Is he after poachers?" asked Flaunden.

"Perhaps—and thinks Hermia would be nervous if he owned it."

Hermia said nothing. She was certain that she knew to whom he was going.

That afternoon, before her talk with Eleanor, when out on a solitary, aimless stroll through the grounds, she had found herself close to that private gate in the palisade, cutting off a part of the ravine near the Keep,

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which Ethan had once unlocked for her to pass through.

The memory seemed to intensify the misery of her present position and, sinking down on the moss among the trees, she had given herself up to considering the enigma of her husband's present attitude. How eager he had been to know whether Guy was likely to be divorced . . . eager for her to marry a *divorcé* . . . he who did not believe in divorce at all! That meant that he wanted to be rid of her, on any terms . . . and even as she thought thus, she heard the sound of a raised, angry voice, scolding. The locked gate opened and two women came through it. One was the woman she had seen with Ethan in the Queen's Room, and the other was Marnie Pickersgill. It was the young one who was talking—or to speak more correctly, screaming.

"I won't stand it no longer—and they can't make me! . . . Nearly over?"—this in reply to a murmured interjection from Marnie. "Don't you believe it! It's going on and he knows it is—and he can't come over me—and so I tell you. . . ."

At this point Marnie gripped her by the wrist, said something and flung her back with a gesture of indignant contempt. Whatever she said it had the effect of instantly silencing the brawler, who retired inside the gate without a word, while Marnie, after making sure that she had gone away, went off alone, walking calmly through the park, comely, neatly dressed and prosperous-looking.

The mere sight of her caused a fluttering of Her-

mia's heart. Some voice within seemed to say: "She is the only person who can help you."

In her desperation an idea arose fully formed within her. She was going alone to the Great Boon Ghyll and she was going to utter her wish. It should be her last throw.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE UTTERED WISH

THAT night, while Meakins was brushing her hair, Hermia's mind was flickering over her plan regarding the Waterfall and the Wish. Suddenly there darted into her brain a thought which caused her to turn sharply round.

"Meakins! Where have you put that little cornelian heart—that charm I used to wear last autumn? Get it out, please."

"But I haven't got it, melody."

"Haven't got it? What do you mean?"

"You must have lost it, melody. Funny I never mentioned it to you, but on your wedding day, or in the night rather, because I didn't get down there to the 'Lord Warden' till past midnight, I found the broken end of the chain still round your neck, but the little heart was gone. I meant to go into the hotel sitting-room where you fell, to look for it; but you were so bad, I forgot all about it. Of course, it was Mr. Storm picked you up and I meant to ask him; but, you see, it was a life-and-death affair and, time you was better, I'd forgotten all about a trifling little thing like that."

"I have a sort of idea that I remember grasping it," said Hermia thoughtfully, "when I was so fright-

ened—feeling so ill. I thought I was going to die and I snatched it out to clutch it. It must have rolled away into a corner of the room.”

“Don’t you think Mr. Storm might have picked it up and put it on one side for you and then forgotten it?”

“That’s possible, of course.”

“In your place I should ask him, melody.”

“Humph!” said Hermia vaguely.

As she lay down in bed she was thinking of Eleanor and her confidence. The little episode had pleased her. She wondered whether, through Eleanor, she might obtain some understanding of the man she called husband. It was but a few minutes later that she heard Eleanor’s deep, unmistakable voice in the corridor, speaking to someone, low but urgently. Knowing that Flaunden never came up to bed before midnight, she slipped out and darted to the door, intending to ask his wife to come in to her and talk a while.

Just outside the door of her room, to the right, there stood against the wall a tall, carved press, of great value and antiquity, which hid the view of her opening door from those standing in the passage beyond it. She became aware that there were two people talking there now—just outside the door leading to the Flaunders’ quarters. One was Eleanor and the other Ethan.

Eleanor was weeping—weeping quite unrestrainedly—and Ethan was saying, in a voice broken with tenderness: “Be brave! Be brave, my dear; it can’t last long!”

Hermia, standing amazed behind the projecting press, listened unashamed—without being fully conscious of eavesdropping.

“But, Ethan,” sobbed Eleanor, “what will you do with her afterwards?”

“She may go where she likes,” was the sharp reply; “but, wherever she goes, she cannot stay here. The position grows intolerable.”

“It complicates things so, doesn’t it?” was the rejoinder, not very audible, because the speaker was using her handkerchief freely. “Good night, Ethan—forgive my giving way like this!—do try and get some sleep. I am so sorry for your sake! The thing could not come at a worse time!”

She pushed open the door of her room, just outside which she was standing—and disappeared. Ethan stood a moment, his hands behind him, his eyes on the ground, frowning; then he turned and walked off along the corridor, in the direction of the Queen’s Room.

Hermia crept back, closed her door and stood in the hot summer darkness, pondering. Were they speaking of herself? Or of the woman in the Keep?

Only one thing was certain: Eleanor was in Ethan’s confidence and his wife was not.

* * * * *

Next morning Ethan was not to be seen. He was presumably away on the mysterious business of which he had spoken overnight.

Flaunden set out immediately after breakfast for Netherwell, telling Hermia that unfortunately Eleanor was not feeling well that morning and that her maid

thought her too poorly to make the effort of seeing even Lady Courland at present.

Hermia was thus left completely alone and, with a feeling that she could not bear her own company, she ran to the telephone to summon Ursula Marston to come and spend the day.

As she reached the telephone room a sudden inspiration came to her. Surely this was her heaven-sent opportunity to ride to Great Boon Ghyll! Such a chance of going thither unseen, unknown to anyone, might never come again.

Forthwith she ordered Roland, the horse she always rode, to be saddled, asked for a packet of sandwiches and sallied forth, telling Hart nothing of her destination, but saying she would most likely not be back until past tea-time.

Through the far-stretching woodlands and across the open moor she rode to Garron Bridge. She had been there several times of late and knew her way perfectly.

Roland carried her daintily over the grassy cobbles of the bridge and she turned his head to the right, down the sunny footpath which led so gaily and guilelessly to the sunless depths below.

She had never penetrated to the shadow of the beeches since her moonlight wandering there with Guy. When she reached the place—the mossy couch upon which she had sat with him, closely enfolded in the lonely night—she experienced a sudden sense of horror. She knew now how perilously near she had drifted to something she feared to contemplate. How could she have been so mad? . . . Are girls, then,

still, in spite of modern self-possession, as completely in the hands of their lover as any Polly Peachum? It had seemed to her at that moment that her love was something fixed and eternal. She would have laughed at the idea that Guy could be fickle. A humiliating feeling of shame crept over her as she remembered Guy's iron grip and her own sensation of helplessness. What would have happened to her if it had not been for the dreadful apparition on the bridge? . . . She told herself that if she had given herself to her lover that night he *could* not have afterwards betrayed her; but the horrible thought hummed in her brain—suppose he had? . . . *Suppose he had?*

She tried in vain to picture what must have been her feelings when Storm showed her the news of Guy's engagement to Nora, if . . . if things had been otherwise?

Her mind once started upon that tack, she tortured herself by reflecting that in her despair she would have behaved pretty much as she actually did. She would have clutched at Storm as her only hope; as she had in fact done. She would have tried to run off with Guy when he appeared on her wedding day; as she had desperately attempted to do. She gave a great sigh of profound thankfulness for the blessed consciousness that no such terrible bar stood between her and the rigid Puritan whom unaccountably she loved.

The thought of Ethan flooded all her mind with its vehemency. In spite of Eleanor, in spite of the mystery girl of the Keep, he must and should return to

her. She must recapture the love that had once been hers.

Thus absorbed, she rode on steadily down the glen till she reached the point at which the massed boulders made it impossible for the horse to proceed further.

There she slipped from Roland's back, active and lithe in her riding breeches, extracted her packet of sandwiches, seated herself on a boulder and ate her lunch. In the silent solitude it almost seemed to her that she could hear the deliberate voice of her husband, quoting certain lines:

"Every wish is like a prayer, with God."

Ethan thought it wrong to traffic with whatever controlled the granting of the Boons. Either it was nothing at all or it was a devil; and one has heard uncomfortable tales of the devil granting a wish under certain conditions. Was this a risking of her own soul, just to feel Ethan's big arms clasping her and his mouth on hers?

Seated there lonely, she hid her hot face in her hands. She looked very young and childish in her boyish riding gear and she felt more inexperienced, more humble, than ever in her life before.

A thought was stealing into her mind. "If every wish is like a prayer with God, then I will wish my wish to God Himself and not to any false god or devil. I will just stand there defenceless and look up to God and tell Him what I wish. I don't deserve that He should listen, but He may. It will be my first prayer . . . and if I should get an answer—sharp and suddenly—a gauntlet with a gift, thrust in my face . . .!"

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Her hands fell, and she raised to the leafy canopy above her head an illumined face of ecstasy. "God!" she whispered, "if I get this—how hard I will try to be good!"

With the thought, she was on her feet, well equipped for scrambling; and she felt the joy of completely recovered health as she swung herself carefully, but easily, downward. In the old days she had tramped with her father through most of southern Europe and was a practised pedestrian in spite of her ornamental appearance.

As the gorge closed over her head and the roar of the water thundered ever louder, deprived of the company even of Roland, she was conscious of nervous fright. The least sound of rolling stone or breaking twig made her stop short, turn about, quickened the beat of her heart.

But nothing stirred, save herself, in all the wilderness.

Cautiously she descended, further and further into the chilly twilight, until she felt in her face the smoke of the spray which rose as from an ever-boiling cauldron. Martin, the faun, had told her that his mother had seen her face in the smoke!

The volume of water coming down was far greater than had been the case last autumn. Her hair and clothes were soon as wet as if she were out in the rain, and she had to keep a careful eye upon her footing. When at last she stood at the foot of the steps which led to the Wishing Rock she thought, with a momentary failure of nerve, that even if she succeeded in scaling them she would find it still harder to descend.

However, she set herself to the task and, after a wet scramble, she succeeded in vanquishing the last step and stood within touch of the silver column of water, which thundered through the hollowed stone.

Now came the worst moment. In order to obtain the granting of the wish, it must be spoken loud enough for the echo to repeat it. In other words, she must shout; and, having reached the magic spot, she felt that it would be most humiliating to retreat without accomplishing her purpose.

But supposing she were overheard!

Standing upon the wet rock, steadied only by her hand upon the slippery shoulder of it, she glanced all about her, above, beneath and around. So far as she could discover, she was absolutely alone and, fearing lest her courage ooze away, she complied at once with the stipulated ritual.

Plunging her hands into the icy torrent, she sent her young voice crying to the dark bastions that enclosed her.

"I cry to God!" she proclaimed dauntlessly. Here she paused a moment to test the pitch of her voice; and Echo answered promptly and softly, like a coaxing mother: "Good!" it seemed to say. "Good! . . . Good!"

There was something reassuring in it—something that drew her on; and she cried aloud: "This is my prayer! Give me the love of Ethan Storm!"

The echoes battled one against another all round the rocky hollow. She had the strong illusion that what it said was: "Love in a storm! Love in a storm!"

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Carried completely out of herself, she cried again: "Give me the love of Ethan Storm"—speaking more slowly, separating each word from the next.

There came a perfect salvo of repetition, but the sound was changed to what sounded like "Thunderstorm! Thunderstorm! Love! Love! Love in a storm!"

Vertigo seized upon the girl. She felt as though devils were mocking her. Through the dying echoes ran the laughter which she remembered to have heard the last time she stood there. Only the fact that her hands were in the icy torrent saved her from fainting. With a gasp she withdrew them and found that they were completely numb. She spread out her arms, leaned against the rock shoulder and panted for breath.

Gradually her head ceased to reel, the trembling fit passed and she stood erect, sending her fearful glance around in search of the demon which had mocked her; and on the rainbow mist of the spray, where an attenuated sunbeam caught it, *she saw a face.*

It hung, suffused in light, beautiful, benignant, like a child's idea of a guardian angel. It seemed to have streaming hair and deep, deep eyes. For two or three seconds she saw it clearly and then it was gone. She was alone once more with the hollow roaring of the remorseless water, the twilight and the clammy rocks.

Yet the lovely face, with its tender look, had brought indescribable comfort. It was like an answer, an assurance of a granted prayer. It encouraged her to a surprising extent.

Actively, and without fear, she swung herself down the sloping, slithery steps, her whole being full of the expectation of some great happiness. The sense of having made herself ridiculous had all passed away; her only feeling was of satisfaction and content.

The task which she had so dreaded, of climbing back to the place where she had left Roland, was accomplished with ease.

The horse seemed nervous and was plunging about, but the sound of her voice and her touch on the bridle soothed him at once. He was but too ready to breast the slope, and they were at the top of the glen before she could have believed it possible.

Garron Bridge lay basking in full sunshine, utterly solitary. She crossed the moor, gained the thick woods and emerged at last upon the high road without having seen one single human creature.

CHAPTER XXX

THE STORM GATHERS

TO Hermia's astonishment it was but little past two o'clock when she rode Roland into the stable-yard. No servants were about, so she dismounted, led the horse to his stall and entered the castle by a back door, whence a small staircase led to the bedroom floor and from which, knowing the place as she now did, she could find her way through the maze of passages to her own quarters.

Meakins was absent, having gone into Darlington for some necessary shopping; but it did not take the Countess long to run the water in her sumptuous bath, slip out of her wet and muddy attire and yield her tired limbs to the delight and soothing of the encompassing warmth.

Dressing herself once more in cool, summer raiment, she took a book and a sunshade, meaning to go out to the garden and be lazy, and to order tea to be brought forthwith.

As she issued from her room she heard voices—almost certainly Ethan's voice—Ethan, who had said that he would be away, on business, all day!

It sounded as though he had just come out of Eleanor's room, closing the door behind him, and a throb of fierce though foolish jealousy caused the

young wife to pause, just within her door, where she was, as she knew, invisible to anyone who stood beyond the big carved press.

He was apparently speaking to one of the staff. "I rang to know if Lady Courland is at home," she heard him say.

Hart replied. "No, sir, her ladyship went out on horseback and took lunch with her. She said she should not be in before tea-time, if then."

"Thanks. That's all," was the brief reply; and Hart's subdued footsteps were just audible, receding in the direction of the stairs. When he might be judged out of earshot, Ethan opened Eleanor's door and said:

"Eleanor, you can come. It's quite all right. Hermia is out, the coast is clear. Come along."

Upon this, Eleanor, who was "too unwell to see even Lady Courland," came out of her room and joined him in the corridor. She did not speak, but Hermia, pressing forward, saw from behind the shelter of the press that she was clinging to Ethan's arm and that his head was bent towards hers. Down the gallery they walked, passing the stairhead, and disappeared into the Queen's Room.

The watcher flung away sunshade and book, stood a moment in a blindness of fury that was almost madness, then darted in pursuit.

Was it for this that she had bent her proud head and schooled her untamed will? Ethan was leading a double life, and Eleanor knew and abetted! Having first ascertained, as he thought, that his own wife was out of the way, he was secretly escorting Lady

Flaunden to the forbidden Keep. Of what they could be going to do there together she could form no idea. The other woman was there—*the other woman!* It was preposterous, inexplicable! But the fact remained that Eleanor and Ethan had cheated Flaunden and herself, one feigning absence, the other illness, to get the coast clear.

“In spite of my faults, I am Ethan’s wife,” she told herself. “He might have said straight out, after I got better, that he did not wish to have any more to do with me, but he did nothing of the kind. He has kept me chained to him, though he doesn’t love me, doesn’t want me! If he hopes that I’ll die of a broken heart, he’s mistaken! I’m going to know what he is about, if he kills me for it! If Eleanor knows, why not I?”

As she crept along towards the fatal door she was girding at herself for having succumbed to the demoniac magic of the Falls. Not God, but a mocking devil had heard her wish and had cheated her, letting her come straight home to discover Ethan’s perfidy.

She had hardly got inside the Queen’s Room, closing the door noiselessly behind her, than she saw that what she had hoped for was the case—the two who had gone by the secret passage had left the panel unsecured—it was very slightly ajar.

It did not take her ladyship long to slip through, nor to realise that there was a second door within, also slightly ajar, which, when opened, disclosed a spiral stair, ascending and descending.

She paused for a moment for reflection. The way down doubtless led, as Rogers had declared, to the

kitchens. It was the way up that she must follow.

It was very dark, but not very long. Two or three twists brought her to the next floor, where was another door, by which she entered a passage so narrow that it was evident that it ran in the thickness of the old castle wall. One end of it was walled up with stone, but in the direction which she judged to be that of the Keep it ran quite a long way, lit at infrequent intervals by loopholes, widely splayed on the inner side.

As she traversed it she was telling herself fiercely, "I have prayed my first prayer; it will also be my last!"

Reaching the end, she came upon a door closing her way. It was not locked, and she opened it very softly. No sound was audible until she had passed through; but upon gaining the small ante-room beyond she could hear a murmur of distant voices.

The place was luxuriously carpeted and contained two or three good bits of old furniture. There were two doors leading from it, one of which was ajar. She pushed this open a very little way and looked in.

A sitting-room, with many book-shelves, easy chairs, pictures and flowers, lay beyond. One feature in it struck her with a sense of some memory recalled, some train of thought which just eluded her. On either side of the hearth was a snake, carved in stone, twisted round a slender column and with its head forming the support of the mantel above.

Where had she seen or heard of such a device?

As she was racking her brains to think what was the association of ideas, the sound of someone ap-

proaching from the farther side of the room caused her to pull the door almost shut. She remained there, holding the handle, so that she could peep through. From a door facing her there burst into the room the handsome young woman whom she had seen with Marnie at the gate. She was crying in a wild, noisy, unrestrained fashion, almost screaming in her grief or rage; tears were streaming down her face as, biting a wet handkerchief, she charged in, fell into an easy chair and sobbed loudly. She was followed in another minute by Lady Flaunden, whose face bore traces of terrible agitation and who looked hopelessly unable to cope with the situation.

After standing over the heaving form mutely for a while, she spoke. "Come, Estella, come, this is all wrong," said she. "You must control yourself."

"Control myself! Control myself! Yes, my grand lady, you can sit down with your hands before you and not care whether I'm alive or dead! When you know that if everyone had their rights I should be mistress of this —— castle and all that it —— well contains; It's mine, I tell you! Mine by right! And I shall go to law to demand it!"

Eleanor winced at the crude expletives, but answered gently.

"If you do go to law you will regret it. The law cannot give you more than you will have as it is. Mr. Storm intends to provide you with enough money to enable you to live where you like and as you like."

"I tell you I'll live here! Here and nowhere else is where I belong, and you can't dislodge me! Ain't it enough that I've spent all these years withering

away, hidden as if I'd done something they could jail me for? And now that at last——”

Absorbed in this scene, the eavesdropper had not noticed the lightest of footfalls behind her. Two hands placed on her shoulders almost made her shriek, but with an effort she controlled herself, turned her head, and found herself looking into the hypnotic eyes of Marnie Pickersgill.

The sibyl's expression was quite benevolent. Smiling at the Countess, she laid her finger on her lip and whispered low but clearly:

“Where's the Bleeding Heart, my lady?”

Hermia replied mechanically, as if she could not help it. “Lost,” she whispered. “Everything is lost.”

Slowly Marnie shook her head. “It's safe,” she told her, “but it should be about your neck. Find it quickly.”

“I don't know where to look . . .”

“Ask Storm——” Marnie broke off in the midst of what she was saying, because of the violence of the noise Estella was making. Eleanor was looking aghast and shaking visibly at the rush of invective that came from the young woman's lips. With a backward smile at Hermia, as though of reassurance, the witch opened the door just wide enough to pass through and slipped into the room. She laid her hand upon Estella's shoulder, apparently with the lightest of pressures. At once the angry shrieking voice died away and silence reigned, punctuated only by sobs.

“Now,” said she at last, “let's have no more of it. You've nothing to complain of and you've always

known it couldn't last. You had better take yourself off. The world's before you."

"I don't go!" gulped the girl. "My place is here."

"Your place never was here, and now it certainly isn't," returned Marnie. "Go you must, and the sooner the better. Come with me now, and Romald-scar will see you later and give you what is just."

"We'll see what the law thinks is just."

"Hoots! Is it blackmail that's in your mind?"

Eleanor spoke for the first time since Marnie entered.

"Mr. Storm will never yield to threats," said she quietly. "I always warned him that it might come to this, but he had a higher opinion of Estella. He did not believe she could repay him in such a fashion."

"Let him give me my rights, then."

"You have no rights at all," said Eleanor patiently.

Suddenly the girl looked up, with an expression of triumphant cunning in her face. "If the law won't give me anything I've another card to play—I'll go to Lady Courland," said she; and laughed. Even as the words left her lips the door through which she and Eleanor had entered opened again, this time to admit Storm.

His aspect gave Hermia a shock. His expression was difficult to analyse. He looked as though he had been through some soul-shaking tragedy; and yet, mingling with his horror was a kind of exaltation—as though the dawn of something wonderful, dazzling, had just been revealed to him.

"Keep her quiet, Marnie, for pity's sake," he said, pulling out a handkerchief and passing it over his

forehead. "I've had about all I can stand from her —— By the way—have you just come? Through the grounds? You didn't see—you can't tell me, I suppose, whether Lady Courland has returned?"

A feverish anxiety was in his eyes as he put the question. Marnie looked up at him with a smile.

"Yes, Romaldscar, her ladyship has returned," said she tranquilly. "She went down to the Falls this morning to utter the dearest wish of her heart; and she has it, God bless her!"

It is doubtful whether Hermia, outside the door, or Ethan, within the room, was the more moved by this calm statement. Storm stood staring at Marnie, growing whiter and whiter, till he looked ready to faint. "The wish of her heart?" he muttered. "What was that, Marnie? What was it?"

The sibyl moved across the room to him and whispered something in his ear. He dropped into a chair as if shot, and for a moment covered his eyes with his hand.

Estella, who had for a few minutes after his entry had fallen quiet, raised her voice in a scream. "I'll go to her, I'll tell her things that'll surprise her," she bawled. "No, don't touch me! Hands off! I'm going to find her ladyship, and if you try to hinder me I'll scream till everyone in the castle comes to see who's being murdered up here in the Keep."

As she ended, she made a dart in the direction of the door. Ethan was too quick for her. He also crossed the room, slammed the door and turned the key, in Hermia's face.

She had had a moment's overwhelming fear as he

approached, certain that she would be found there; as soon as relief would let her move, she fled away, speeding through the narrow passage, down the winding stair, out into the Queen's Room and so back to her own, wherein Meakins, just back from Darlington, was folding and putting away her clothes.

"Well, so there you are"; she observed somewhat tartly. "Hart said you wasn't back yet."

"But you see I am. Go and order tea to be brought up to me here, please; and then you'll have to pack for all you're worth, for I'm leaving this house to-night."

"Leaving the house now, are you? In an airy-plane, shouldn't wonder."

"Oh, you needn't come if you don't want to. In fact I don't suppose I can afford you. I shall have to live on what's left of my thousand pounds until I can sell Courland."

"Sell a fiddlestick," was the testy answer as Meakins pulled forward the sofa and arranged the pillows as Hermia liked them. "What's gone wrong now? Not finding it so easy to whistle back your man as you thought it would be? He's a strong, slow sort, you must remember, and once bit, twice shy. It's not surprising."

Her ladyship buried her face and moaned. What would Meakins say if she told her that the virtuous Storm was all a sham and a pretence? She could not herself believe it somehow, in spite of the evidence of her own sight and hearing. Oh, that devilish Marnie, smiling and calm, though her own daugh-

ter was the cast-off mistress of the man she fawned upon!

"You hear," was what she said aloud. "I told you I am going away. You had better begin to pack."

"Hadn't you better wait to decide till you've had a cup of tea, melody?"

Hermia lifted to her a face that convinced Meakins of the reality of what she was feeling. "You think I'm raving, but I'm not," said she, slowly and heavily. "I think I'm just—heart-broken. But perhaps, after all, I won't go away. It's such an effort . . . and nothing is worth while . . . nothing at all. It might be better just to push a little needle quietly into my arm and settle the question out of hand."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE STORM BREAKS

AN hour later, having had some tea and been well scolded, Hermia was sitting at the oriel window of her sitting-room in a condition between despair and a stupefied kind of wonder. She had no idea as to what she meant to do; the future was just a black gulf. Beyond a slight curiosity as to whether Estella would succeed in eluding her guardians and come to pay her a visit, she had no coherent thoughts.

Voices on the terrace below broke into her lethargy. Eleanor and Ethan strolled into sight, deep in talk of an evidently agitating nature. Ethan was haggard, his usually correctly arranged hair was rough, his eyes were burning, his whole personality seemed to have passed through some devastating change. As they passed beneath her widely-opened casement, Hermia heard Eleanor say:

"I should tell her at once. I am sure she is very unhappy."

To which Ethan rejoined, "She may be unhappier still after I have spoken. Besides—how can one put such a thing into words? What will she think of me? I'm ashamed to look her in the face."

They passed on to the terrace end and turned. Ethan, as he did so, glanced up at the oriel and saw

the head and shoulders of his wife. She was eyeing him intently, and his keen eyes caught her in the act. At once he hastened forward, holding her look with his own, stopped when he was near enough to be heard and spoke urgently.

"Hermia, there is something I have to tell you without delay. I am coming up to see you at once."

Leaning her chin on her hand she gazed down upon his ravaged face. "I cannot give you long," said she icily, "I am very busy." . . .

"Nevertheless, I am coming," he replied, with a kind of fierce eagerness; and entered the house at once by the window below her own.

Eleanor stood a moment, looking up at the beautiful cold girl above. She would have given much to feel herself intimate enough to say a word—to put in a plea for the man on his way to make confession; but she knew that she dared not. Hermia's glance was distant and faintly mistrustful. Forcing a smile, Lady Flaunden merely kissed her hand and turned away. The smile she received in return was as obviously mechanical as her own.

Hermia turned slowly from the window, furious because of the thick, heavy beating of her heart.

Just a year ago this man had come into her life, and since then how differently he had affected her! From a contemptuous indifference to a cool liking, thence, by degrees she could not trace, to a love which had grown until it filled the world; finally, the crashing of the idol, the realisation that for the second time she had loved a man who existed only in her own fancy.

As that thought crossed her mind he entered—for the first time since the room had been hers. He began to speak precipitately, as if he feared his courage might fail him. "Hermia, for pity's sake, help me a little! I've come to tell you something that may possibly prevent you from having anything more to do with me."

She let a small laugh escape her. "I haven't had much to do with you so far, have I?—except to spend your money——"

"Money? What has money to do with anything?" he cried desperately. "Let's put money out of our minds; it will never be the thing that could come between you and me——" He paced the length of the room and returned. She stood motionless, her back to the window, watching him.

"You're too modern ever to have read Tennyson," he burst out at last. "If you had, you might remember some lines describing the feelings of Geraint—the surly boor!—when he wanted to tell his wife that he suspected her of something base—it seemed to him at the moment more easy to strike her dead

*Than to turn round and to her own bright face
Accuse her of the least disloyalty . . .*

That's how I am feeling now. For the last six months I have been like that besotted fool—daring to believe you guilty of—of something I felt I couldn't forgive." This was so completely unlike what she had expected to hear, that Hermia stood wide-eyed, silent and wondering.

"To believe *me* guilty of . . . something *you* felt you couldn't forgive?" she repeated after a moment, as he paused. "Well, it is true, isn't it, that I meant to run away from you with Guy. . . . A few minutes after making my vows to you, I had decided to break them. Do you mean that you thought I had done something worse than that?"

He nodded, clearing his throat. "There was some excuse for you, Hermia, that day. You had always loved Dinsmore, and I knew it. You had never loved me. I knew that, too. I had to stop you, because he meant to betray you. . . . I think you saw that afterwards, didn't you? I really hadn't any choice but to stop it."

"I know," she admitted very low. "As soon as I could think reasonably I was grateful to you. It's hard to explain my own motives that day; but I think I felt that I had let him down—had been too headlong. You were rich and generous, and for that bait I had forsaken my lover; and he had—come back to me. I thought that, if I left you *then*, it would not be so mean as if I were to do it later."

"You were very much in love with him."

"Enough to brave poverty. I had begged poor Uncle Joe for a few weeks' respite. I felt so sure that Guy would do as he said he meant to do—find work, and come for me . . . but please tell me. What else did you think I had done—worse than trying to run away?"

"Something I was told last winter——" he seemed to choke upon the words. "My informant swore it

was true; and—and there was corroborative evidence . . .”

“Evidence of what?”

“That you were—actually—with Dinsmore in the wood—all night. That you had married me without telling me that you already belonged to him.”

“Oh!” said Hermia, recoiling; and “Oh!” she uttered once again as she sank down upon a chair and stared straight before her.

“So that is what you have had against me,” she said presently, with surprising calmness. “But I gather that you no longer think it true. Why not?”

“A death-bed confession,” he muttered haltingly. “He had sworn to me that he saw—what excluded doubt; but to-day he confessed that such was not the case. When he saw you, you were running away—trying to escape—and Dinsmore was following you, persuading you to go back.”

“Ah! The monk!”

He looked bewildered for a moment, then said: “Yes, the monk it was. I knew that Dinsmore had been out practically all that night; that you met him secretly next morning; after which he departed suddenly. Mrs. Belton believed it, of that I am sure. She also left the following day, presumably to detach him from you without delay.”

After a pause—“I think you said you had other evidence?”

“I thought so. Your whole attitude, when you knew he had forsaken you—your acceptance of me—your willingness to be married at once. And also—your own words. You said to me, that day we were

married—that *you belonged to him*. At the time I did not attach any fatal importance to those words—thought them hyperbolical . . . but afterwards . . .”

“You didn’t hear this at first? You didn’t know of it when you came to Dieppe?”

“Not until Christmas,” he replied heavily.

“Well,” said she quietly, “it is most interesting. Had it been true, would you never have forgiven me? I’m rather anxious to know about that.”

Ethan looked staggered. Evidently he was surprised. He had not looked for a sneer, and she was regarding him with a mixture of scorn and resentment.

“I’d have forgiven you anything if you had owned up,” he stumbled, “but I see it’s not going to be easy for *you* to forgive *me* for having believed it.”

She leaned back with a cruel smile. “If that was all I had to forgive, we might perhaps make a patched up peace. But, unfortunately—or is it fortunately?—I now know too much about you. Ethan Storm, I thought you a good man—the best man I had ever met; and you are the most sanctimonious hypocrite on the face of the earth.”

He sprang to his feet on that. “Hermia, what are you saying? I may be a narrow, obfuscated old stick, but a hypocrite! No! How have I deceived you? In what?”

She leaned back in her chair languidly. “We had better not go into it,” said she. “There is no object in discussing such a thing; but that a man with your record should play the Pharisee is just a little too much. Well! You have said what you came to say,

so perhaps you will be good enough to go now. As I told you, I am pressed for time, as I intend to leave this house to-night, and not to return."

"Hermia!"

"I mean it. I know men don't attempt to keep the standard they insist upon in their wives. I'm not strait-laced; but I draw the line at a liar and a hypocrite—a psalm-singing, church-going humbug!"

"Are you mad?"

"Not at all. You know so well what I am talking about, that explanations would be superfluous. So perhaps now you'll excuse me."

She had been deliberately gathering up her handkerchief and one or two other trifles from the table at her side. Now she rose and moved in dignified fashion towards the door of her bedroom. He sprang up swiftly, went to the door, stood with his back to it. "No, you don't—not until I know what you mean! Of what do you accuse me?"

It was with an effort that she held her contemptuous pose. But she succeeded in facing him boldly enough.

"I don't accuse you of anything. I *know* you—all about you! I heard you to-day, asking Hart if I was safely out of the way—telling Eleanor the coast was clear! I saw you go to the secret passage, and I followed! I heard you and Eleanor arguing with your cast-off lady-love—telling her she had no legal claim upon you—trying to persuade the poor wretch to 'go quiet'! That a woman like Eleanor should actually be aiding and abetting, shows the hateful power you have with women—the power that I, like

a fool, never discovered till too late! Eleanor was telling me yesterday of her own lifelong love for you—and you preferred an uneducated virago like your Estella!" She paused, gloating over his livid face and the raging fire of his eyes. "Will you let me pass now?"

"Certainly not," at last he spoke, as if breaking some embargo. "You are coming with me—upstairs—now—you are going to hear the truth about this matter." He gripped her wrist almost savagely, and she was imprudent enough to writhe away from him, causing him instantly to prison the other wrist also. "So you came upstairs this afternoon?" he said in an odd voice.

"I was just outside the door when you shut it, because poor Estella threatened to scream," she retorted with fire.

"All right. Then you will come upstairs again. Now, this moment. Even a few minutes hence might be too late—it is now or never. Come, I tell you."

"I will not come."

She could not have said what prompted this refusal, for her frame of mind had passed beyond reason. In her jealousy, her one desire was to thwart him. She struggled to free her hands, and he went mad.

"You won't come. Then I must carry you," he almost shouted; and forthwith put his threat into execution, picking her up from the ground as if she had been a child and bearing her across the room to the outer door.

"Ethan"—with a pitiful effort to preserve her dig-

nity—"you think that because I'm not Estella's type, I shall not be noisy. But I will. If you don't put me down, I'll scream."

"I don't care a hang—scream away—you are coming with me," was the reply, as he flung open the door and bore her with long strides along the corridor. He seemed altogether beside himself.

She was quite incapable of movement, not only because of the firm constraint of his muscular arms, but because the sudden close physical contact was weakening her opposition.

"Ethan—Ethan," she faltered, almost sobbing. "Put me down! If I must go, I'll go on my feet."

"All right. Wait till we are in the Queen's Room."

It seemed but a moment before they were there, and the man, setting her on the floor, held her still encircled while he locked the door, withdrew the key and put it in his pocket. She was shaking and gasping. "Oh, Ethan, don't be so rough!"

"Rough! *Rough*, you say! And what of you? What mud have you just dared to fling at me? If I gave you what you deserved I should whip you!" he stormed, catching her again in his arms. "Come along now, you have got to eat your words, and the sooner the better—no affectation, please—you are perfectly strong now—why, what? . . ."

He broke off, for the little golden head swayed like a flower on a broken stem and fell against his coat. In a moment his fury had deserted him, and he stood helpless, trembling with the force of his feeling as he upheld her tenderly. "Hermia—what is it? I

haven't hurt you? I can't have been such a brute? But you see I must show you at once . . ."

His voice died away with a pitiful break as she stroked the soft aureole of hair from her white forehead. Her eyes remained closed. He lifted her again, very gently this time, and carried her to the window, laying her on the window-seat in such a way that he supported her head and shoulders in his arms. Presumably the air revived her—or, alternatively, she may have been less overcome than she chose to appear—a woman must fight with what weapons she has. Anyway, heavy lids lifted, and she gazed away into space dreamily.

"All right now?" he inquired wistfully. "Shall I take you back to your room?"

"I thought you wanted me to go up *there*?"

"So I do, if you will come."

She sat up with determination, and put her feet to the ground. "Yes, I'll come."

She took two or three steps, but extended her hand as if she still felt shaky. He grasped it, and together they crossed the room and passed through the panel to the spiral stair.

Not a word was exchanged between them as they ascended and traversed the narrow passage to the Keep. When they were both in the ante-room, he turned to her, his eloquent eyes full of concern. "All right?" he asked, with an almost complete return of his old diffidence. There was a queer pathos in that which caused her to display the very tiniest smile of reassurance. She nodded without speech. He hesitated for a moment, then said:

"Hermia, in bringing you here, I am placing myself in your hands. I mean that I am letting you into a very carefully guarded secret. If—if things had been normal between you and me—you would have heard it as soon as you were my wife. Now that you have discovered half, I must tell you of the other half. In doing this, I'm putting power into your hands. It's a secret that nobody must ever know. But I'm not going to ask you to swear to keep it. I feel I have no right to do that."

Again she nodded; but after a moment, as he seemed to await an answer, wistfully she said: "I'm bewildered. I don't know where I am, nor whither we are going, you and I . . . but I think you may trust me, Ethan."

On that he took her hand, opened the sitting-room door and passed through it into a large, luxuriously furnished bedroom. On its threshold he paused. "You are going to look at death," he said.

Then, crossing the room to the bed, he turned back a delicate linen handkerchief and she saw the face of a dead man.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE SKIES CLEAR

THIS was so unexpected and so dreadful that for a moment Hermia felt like escaping; but she controlled her shrinking and crept slowly and softly near enough to Storm to be able to study the dead face.

It was that of a man somewhere about five-and-thirty, much emaciated, but still handsome, and bearing a noticeable resemblance to Eleanor.

There was a long silence. Husband and wife, side by side, gazed down upon the face that looked so finely sculptured. The dark hair was silvered at the temples, the lashes were long, and the features clear-cut. Only the mouth showed weakness.

"Who was he?" asked Hermia at last.

"Garron Lowrie, Eleanor's brother."

"Garron Lowrie!" she cried, in sudden fear that she was being deceived after all. "Why, his monument is in the church—he was killed in the war."

"Officially, yes. Nevertheless, he lies here."

She stood amazed, thoughts spinning in her head. "He was—the monk?"

"Yes; and Estella, Marnie's daughter, says that she is his wife."

Hermia gasped.

"It seemed to me essential, after what you have

said, that you should actually see him. Do you detect the likeness to Eleanor——?”

“—Oh, a strong likeness——”

“—Because he will be buried to-night. He died three hours ago. If you had not actually seen him you might not have believed in his existence on the strength of my unsupported statement.”

“How came he here?”

“That is what I must tell you, or Eleanor will. I shall have to be busy to-night, helping Rogers. It might come best from her. I must warn you that Flaunden knows nothing of it, and I hope he never will. It’s a story of shame.”

He covered the dead face, and replaced the eucharis lilies which he had moved aside. Then he turned to her. “Am I cleared of the infamy you credited me with?”

She had moved to the door, but she turned back and retorted: “What of the infamy you have believed of me, all this time?”

It was a fair thrust, and he had nothing to say.

In a stupid silence they retraced their steps, and he walked back with her as far as the door of her room. There he paused. “I hope,” said he awkwardly, “that you won’t leave the house until—well, until we have spoken further.”

Once more he had receded from her, and was back again entrenched behind his usual cold manner. His wife emitted a funny little cry that was half a laugh and half a scream of exasperation. “Oh, *confound* your Victorianism!”

With that she darted swiftly within her room and shut the door in his face. Ethan started; colour rose to his very brow, and he laid his hands upon the handle; at the moment, however, he heard the key turned, and after a moment's hesitation walked away; but he was smiling.

The four of them met at dinner. Eleanor was very pale, and her eyes were heavy with weeping. Studying her furtively, Hermia marvelled a little that she, the dead man's only sister, should have left the task of caring for him to others. Lady Flaunden's pallor and her somewhat flurried manner were plausibly accounted for by the message brought back from Netherwell by her husband. His mother's illness had reached the final stage, and it was the wish of all the family that his wife and he should be on the spot. Arrangements for their accommodation had been hastily made, and he meant to carry off Eleanor in the car immediately after dinner.

Hermia, although aching to hear the story which should explain what she had that day seen, put all on one side in her pity for the distress of Garry's sister. She was helpful and sympathetic, and they parted with affection; the beginning, as it turned out, of a life-long friendship. It was about nine o'clock when the guests drove away, their host and hostess both being at the door to see them set out.

As Hermia turned away, Storm said in a low voice: "I have time for a stroll in the garden, if you would like it."

She paused, facing him in that noble hall which she

had never hitherto felt to be really her home, but which seemed this evening to radiate an atmosphere of welcome.

"You have to be up most of the night—haven't you? You ought to go to bed now and rest. If you will do that"—timidly—"I would call you at any time you wished!"

He smiled down at the lifted eyes. "That's awfully nice of you," he said; "but to go into the garden with you would rest me far more than going to bed. Let's come."

He put his hand within her arm, and as they passed the hall table he picked up an ermine wrap which she had thrown down there and folded it round her. "I know you are aching to hear all about it," he said.

"Oh, I am! But I feel you ought to rest."

"I have lain awake so much of late that I am growing to have a horror of bed," he said with a little sigh; "for the last four nights I have been sitting up with poor Garry—in turns with the Rogerses and that unspeakable Estella. . . . My word, Hermia, you gave me credit for poor taste!"

"I didn't give you credit for anything! I simply saw with my own eyes," she replied indignantly; "and Prue had told me before—she heard it from Nora—that you had a lady in the Keep. . . ."

"Why were you so angry about it? If it had been true, you could have divorced me——"

"Who said I wanted to divorce you?"

"At least you are on the point of leaving me—or so I understood!"

"Yes, because I couldn't bear it any longer! I just

couldn't bear it! Come along this path—under the loggia there are some comfy chairs——”

“Where you like. Yes, this will do very well.” They paused before the loggia, hung with rambler roses, which overlooked the ravine. Hermia went in, and seated herself upon a basket chair without arms, motioning him to another; but he collected a pile of cushions, set them on the ground and seated himself thereon, quite close to her, so that his dark head was just below her own.

“And now where am I to begin? I want you to understand the whole position thoroughly, before——”

“Before?”

“Well, before packing your trunks; also before I drop off to sleep! To start with, Garry was Eleanor's brother, as I suppose you knew. You have seen his monument on the church wall. Not a greater lie, I always feel, than half the other monuments there. He was a handsome, taking lad, but always weak and also a little erratic. The old Colonel simply doted on him. He was his godfather, and the lad was named after him, Garron Brice Lowrie, and the understanding was that when he inherited this place he was to change his name to Garron, though he was no relation at all to the family. Is this what you want to hear?”

“Yes, everything—just as it comes into your head.”

“There used to be trouble occasionally, while Garry was at Charterhouse, on account of his unstable character. But war was declared just before he went up to the 'Varsity, and off he went with a commission, and was rushed out to the front with nothing but his

Public School O.T.C. training, a lad in his teens, utterly without experience, highly strung and nervous. . . .”

“Were you there, too?”

“Yes, but in a different Division, though, as a fact, we were close together during the terrible pressure at Ypres. The Germans had been giving us hell for days when this poor lad brought up his men to the trenches—utterly raw, he was, and he lost his head the first time he was under fire—went all to pieces, simply turned tail and ran. Young Rogers, his batman, only son of this man here, was with him. They had been boys together and he was devoted to Garry. He tried all he knew to bring him to reason, but in vain; and then he went after him, sent by the captain to try and collect the company. By that time the infection had spread, as it usually does, and a whole lot of the new men were running. Rogers was swept along with them or so we suppose; and they were exposed to a much hotter fire than they would have been if they had kept their heads and ‘stayed put.’ For what afterwards happened I have only Garry’s own story.”

“Oh, I pity them! They were so untried!”

“That is true. But many went through the test without flinching. However, according to Garry’s account, he found himself, after a spell of unconsciousness—or of sleep—lying near Rogers, who was dying fast, mortally hit. Garry had been peppered slightly, but nothing to matter. Rogers spoke to him urgently, telling him that there was but one thing to be done, and that was that they should change clothes. Rogers had been out a good deal longer than Garry, and was due for leave. He had his leave papers in his pocket,

and Lowrie and he were much the same height. 'If they find you, sir, they'll stand you against a wall and shoot you for a deserter.'

"Garry refused, and at last, after hours and hours of anguish, Rogers died. Night came on and nobody found them. Our men had been dislodged from their position (temporarily, as it afterwards proved), anyhow, we had to go back, and the few men who had fallen at that particular spot could not be brought in. Then Garry began to think that perhaps he had better do as Rogers had suggested, and he did it. The poor dead chap had been persuading him to the last, and had unfastened all his clothes. But Garry says he thinks it took him four hours to effect the exchange. He does not remember how he got back to the lines, but he did. There was a great tumult at the dressing station, none of his own men were about, and they were getting rid of as many cases as they could. When they found he was due for leave, they sent him off, though his injuries were not what is known as a 'blighty one.'—You're not feeling cold, are you?"

"No, I was shivering with horror. Go on."

"He got home here at about two o'clock in the morning, found the key of the Keep door, which was always kept in a chink in the wall, let himself in, came through the secret passage and appeared in Colonel Brice's room."

"I wonder the Colonel did not die of shock."

"He almost did. Eleanor was away, doing ambulance work; he was quite alone. Nobody but the Rogerses and he knew of the return. But when the Colonel heard the story, his heart failed him. How

could he hand over the boy, who was all the world to him, to a shooting squad? . . . And then there was the disgrace . . .”

“So they hid him?”

“They hid him. Next day he was raving in brain fever, and poor old Brice hoped that death might cut the knot. But Garry recovered, physically, though, sad to say, not his mental powers. For two or three years he remained completely insane, and, manifestly, there was no use in handing him over in that state to the military authorities. Afterwards he had lucid intervals, but his health was bad, and grew worse. His life seemed always to hang upon a thread. No human soul but Rogers and the Colonel knew of his being there. He was officially gazetted dead; the things found on his body were sent home. By the time his corpse was found, it was recognisable only by the disc, contents of pocket, and so on.”

“Eleanor did not know?”

“The Colonel hadn’t the heart to tell her. She did not even know of his cowardice, for the authorities in their report glossed it over in the way they used to—on the *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* principle, I suppose. They sent home his silver cigarette case, regimental badge, and so on, and she cherished his memory as that of a hero who had died for his country. I knew all about it, for our lot was close to his in the lines, and it was a good deal talked of at the time——”

“Well, now comes the most interesting part of it to me. How and when did you come to know the secret?”

“I was, I suppose, the Colonel’s greatest friend, in

spite of the difference in our ages. I used to play chess with him, and walk with him. It was a rule that I spent all my week-ends here, and for several years he used to send the car for me regularly every Saturday evening, and drive me back to Balderston on Sunday night. After Garry's reputed death he grew to be very dependent upon me, and I used to transact all his business for him. At last he had an attack of the obscure form of heart disease which finally carried him off. He appeared to recover completely, but the scare had led him to consider what would happen to poor Garry if he died. So he hesitated, being strongly urged by Rogers to let nobody into the secret. Then something happened which clinched the matter. Estella came back."

"She had been away?"

"For about seven years. She went out to France on some kind of war work, and never came home. Her mother supposed her dead. However, back she came, one fine day; and she began to haunt the woods round Romaldscar. She discovered the palisading which the Colonel had put up to enable the prisoner to take exercise unseen. That may have awakened suspicion in her mind, though I hardly see why. My own idea is that she had somehow got wind of there being someone else in the Keep besides the Rogerses, and that she was quite determined to find out who it was. Anyway, she succeeded in getting inside the palisading and met Garry, who was at that time, as it happened, as sane as he ever was. You can understand how bored the poor fellow had become, shut up here all the time; and Estella acted to perfection the rapture

of the woman who, after thinking herself widowed, finds her husband living."

"They really were married?"

"Oh, yes; he admitted that he married her at a registry office in Carlisle, two days before he went to the front. As you may suppose, her existence tangled up the whole situation horribly. Garry wanted to have her with him, and the Colonel was distracted. However, before any such thing could be arranged, Garry had an acute attack of mania and tried to kill her, which so terrified her that she declined to go near him. However, the Colonel thought the time had come to take someone else into his confidence; and, after making me take a very solemn oath of secrecy, he told me everything, and put before me the suggestion that he would make me his heir if I would take on the job. Of course I could see that in the event of his death, Eleanor would have a very difficult time. Her brother was officially dead; she had come into his fortune. The Colonel had insisted on his making a will in his sister's favour before leaving for France; and, curiously enough, he signed it thirty-six hours after his marriage, which he dared not confess, so that it was valid, granted the fact of his death. Estella could not be brought to see that, as her husband was not related to Colonel Brice, he had no legal claim on the estates, which he could inherit only if they were left to him by will. I consented to the Colonel's plan, making only the stipulation that Eleanor must be told the whole story and must approve of the course suggested."

"And he agreed to that?"

"He saw for himself that it was necessary. It was a great shock to her, naturally, but she was not merely willing but eager to have it settled in the way suggested. She never liked Romaldscar and did not wish to have it left to her. And she had any amount of money. The Colonel knew that he could trust her to provide liberally for her brother and his unwelcome wife. The difficulty was that they could not bind me legally without giving away the show."

"Ah! They knew they could trust you, too——"

"You don't find that astonishing?—We did what we could; I bound myself by a solemn oath in the presence of the Colonel, Eleanor and Rogers. There is in existence a private agreement between Eleanor and myself, signed by us both; but it has no force in law. I went into the thing lightheartedly, thinking it certain that the Colonel would outlive Garry, and make a new will. Garry never had any constitution, and his health grew daily worse. . . . But in six months from the signing of the will, the Colonel was found dead in bed, and I came into everything."

"Were you pleased?"

"I'm human, Hermia, though you mayn't think so. I had always longed for scope, and the chance to do some good in the world. And then I saw you . . . and I knew that my money might give you to me . . . and I think I went mad."

"Or grew sane—which?"

He passed his hand over his forehead wearily. "Which?" he echoed. "I feel as if I may be mad just now, and only dreaming that I am here, so near to you—to the softness of you and the fragrance

. . . it seems that if I could just lay my head upon you for five minutes, I should have rest—I should be able to think clearly again. . . .”

His voice grew indistinct, he leaned towards her. She slipped her hand round his neck and drew him gently against her.

“Only for a minute,” he muttered; “I shall wake up again soon . . . and be quite fresh . . . but at this moment I’m positively drunk with sleep. . . .”

His head sank to its resting-place, and Hermia pulled the ermine wrap round them both. Without moving, she picked up a small rug which she used to cover her feet and flung it lightly over his knees. Then she leaned back, both her arms about him, and let the poignancy of this new experience sink into her soul.

This was her man, her tired man, sleeping on her breast. He had fought his exhaustion until she was in possession of an outline of what she wished to know, and then had succumbed. She leaned back, supported by the chair, and felt that she could remain thus for hours, her heart singing, every nerve athrill with the rapture of mere contact.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CLEAR SHINING AFTER RAIN

OVER the loggia the stars swung solemnly, the breath of night was balmy with the scent of roses, the distant roaring of the torrent sounded very loud in the silence.

Still Ethan slept and still his wife held him, in an ecstasy that seemed to her incredible, but which was sweet beyond her dreams. Presently she lowered her head so that her cheek rested upon his thick black hair; and before the castle clock had sighed out midnight, she, too, was sleeping tranquilly.

Time after time the dreamy sound of the clock chiming broke the silence yet did not break their peace; but just after a quarter to two had struck, a very light footfall was audible upon the gravel pathway, and at its sound, Hermia started, and with a mind confused with slumber cried out: "Who's that?"

Her start and cry awakened Ethan at once, and with a bound he was on his feet.

"Hush ye, Romaldscar," said a gentle voice from the starry night outside the loggia, "'tis only me—Marnie. Rogers sent me to find you and to tell you that it's almost two o'clock and he's ready and waiting for you. I slipped along by way of the Queen's

Room to your part of the Castle, but ye were not there. Then I sought her ladyship's room, but that was empty, too. So I guessed I would find ye out of doors and both together."

"Two o'clock! I've been asleep nearly three hours," muttered Ethan, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles like a drowsy boy. He stooped to Hermia, who was easing her limbs in a long, luxurious stretch. "You must be awfully cramped! Forgive me, I simply couldn't keep awake!"

She gave a low, happy laugh. "But I've been asleep, too! . . . Oh, isn't sleep delicious?"

"The Falls have no' kept ye waiting for your Boon, it seems, my lady," put in the insinuating voice of Marnie from the doorway.

Clinging to Ethan's offered arm, Hermia rose to her feet and went swiftly forward. "Oh, Marnie, you witch! *You heard me?*"

"I heard you, aye! And, Romaldscar, you should be a glad man this day, for the Falls cannot be made fools of, and if the wish your wife wished hadna been the dearest wish of her heart, it wouldna ha' been grantit."

Hermia darted out of the shadows and stood in the moonlight facing her. "Marnie," she cried impetuously, "it was not a wish, it was a prayer! I begged my boon of God—the Christian God—not of any demon——"

"And you did right," was the placid answer. "Of old, folks did the same. They cried to what they felt to be God—to their God—and it was fit that you should make your prayer to yours. It is shown

that you were right, because your boon is grantit."

Ethan had followed his wife out upon the path, and during the silence that followed this, he was fighting an insurgent passion that almost mastered him.

"Do you realise," he whispered to his wife, "that at the very moment that you were down there, alone, as you thought, in that wild black hole, poor Garry was confessing to me that she had slandered you? . . . But it was a wasted wish, after all, since you already had what you went to crave."

"It was my first prayer," she whispered back, with a sob; and it seemed natural to hide her face against his coat.

"And now, Romaldscar," went on Marnie's quiet voice, "now that you know that you have her heart, ye should give it back to her."

"Give it back!" he echoed. "What is she talking about? Oh, I know! The little *Cœur Percé*! In the name of all the demons, Marnie, how did you know I had it?"

"I know," said she calmly.

Ethan took his arms from about his wife with an effect of using force to disengage himself. "You shall have it back," he assured her; "but at this moment I can't—I mustn't—stay. I have to fulfil the last count of my promise to the Colonel. When I come back my whole duty will have been performed, and I shall be free——"

"Wait one moment, Romaldscar," said Marnie, "I have news for you. I promised you weeks since that if I could wring the truth from Estella I would do so. She's a wicked woman, but mayhap it is not

all her fault. She is the child of hate and of reluctance, and I never loved her. Some words she let fall, not long since, set me thinking; so I sent Martin over to Tynemouth to make inquiries. When he came back he brought proof that Estella married a Canadian trooper there, about a month before she married Garron Lowrie. Yes, and after the news of Garron's death she went back to her real husband and he forgave her and took her to Canada with him after the war; and there she bore him two children. You have her in the hollow of your hand. Her husband is alive—I have a cable from him—and she has no claim on you."

"Her husband is alive, you say?"

"Not only that, but he will have her back if she will go. He is in Saskatchewan and his name is Daniel Moffat."

"Well," said Ethan thoughtfully, "that seems to dispose of poor Estella. Better settle her money on her and her children, and send her off to Saskatchewan. Come and see me to-morrow, Marnie, and we'll arrange it all. I must be off now."

Hermia laid her hand upon his arm.

"You are going to bury him?" she whispered.

Yes. The Colonel had made all the arrangements before he died. The resting-place is ready. Only Rogers and I know where." He held both her hands as she stood before him. "God bless you—till to-morrow," he whispered; and kissed her forehead. "Marnie—see her ladyship safely into the house, please."

On the words he was gone. Only the woman upon

whose brow was the touch of his mouth, whose hands were warm with the clasp of his, could guess what it cost him to go.

There was just the hint of the midsummer dawn in the sky as Hermia and the sibyl walked together to the garden door which Hart, knowing them to be out of doors, had left on the latch.

As she crept in and lightly and noiselessly went her way through the sleeping castle, the Countess felt as if this girl walking upstairs to her bridal were a different person altogether from Hermia Meynell.

Life was not going to be play-time any more, but full of work and of high purpose. It was to be difficult, she foresaw, and how unlike her own fancies for her own future!

Yet to this she knew herself vowed irrevocably, and however hard the ploughing, she did not believe that she would look back.

For she would not be ploughing alone, but yoked with a companion who would never, never let her down—who might make her angry, might puzzle her, might conceivably misunderstand her—but who could never disappoint her.

She flitted by a staircase window, upon which in the half dark of the northern light the bleeding hearts could just be seen to glimmer; and as she passed into her room to await the morrow and the coming of love, she was murmuring to herself:

“Cœur percé se lève.”



